

Saints Jacinta and Francisco Marto

Shepherds of Fatima

by Anne Eileen Heffernan, FSP and
Patricia Edward Jablonski, FSP



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FUN AND FREEDOM

“Wait, Francisco!” six-year-old Jacinta panted. “Wait for me!”

Francisco grinned as he turned back toward his sister. He was almost two years older than Jacinta, and sometimes he was just too quick for her.

“All right,” he called over the bleating of their lambs. “But if we don’t hurry, we won’t catch up with Lucia!”

The day was a perfect one for the two shepherds, the youngest of the eleven children of Peter and Olympia Marto. The sun sparkled over nearby Fatima, a mountain village cradled in the heart of Portugal. Puffy clouds floated overhead as the children’s flocks grazed on the slopes.

Francisco lifted his hand to shield his eyes. He squinted and scanned the horizon. “Look! There’s Lucia up ahead,” he pointed with his staff.

Nine-year-old Lucia dos Santos was more than their cousin. She was their best

friend. The three were always together. They would wake up early every morning. Then, before the sun scattered the mists from the valleys, they would be off for the pasture with their flocks. They didn't mind having to get up so early, knowing they'd soon be having fun in the wide-open spaces.

Lucia knew every nook and cranny of the mountains. A hill she especially liked to take her cousins to was called the Cabeço. It was a beautiful spot covered with brightly colored flowers of all kinds. Good pasture-lands could be found there, and in bad weather the children could take shelter in a small cave on the hillside.

The little shepherds carried their lunches with them. They stayed in the fields from morning to evening, returning home at night to join their parents for supper and the family rosary.

As the trio hurried their flocks along, the baaing of the sheep mingled with their prayers—the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Angel of God. They noticed that if they shouted loud enough, their words would bounce back to them in echoes from the surrounding cliffs. Jacinta soon discovered that the word “Mary” seemed to make the best echo. From then on the tiny shepherdess

never tired of shouting "Mary!" to the mountains.

After lunch, they would recite the rosary together. The rosary was a family custom. And customs have to be respected. But the rosary can seem like a very long prayer . . . especially to three young children anxious to have some fun. So one of them—probably Jacinta again—invented a way out. Instead of saying the complete prayers, one of the three would call, "Hail Mary!" and the other two would answer, "Holy Mary!" They would simply end each decade with the two words "Our Father." In this way the rosary was quickly "finished," and they could get back to their games. Often Francisco would play his reed flute while Lucia and Jacinta danced.

The three cousins had very different characters.

As the oldest, Lucia was the leader of the group. She was energetic and cheerful. She was also a very down-to-earth type of person. Her flat nose, rather large mouth, and thick black hair added to her "practical" look.

Jacinta, whose facial features were more delicate than Lucia's, was quick and lively too. But she was also much more sensitive and vain than her older cousin. She liked

to have her own way, and if someone said something that offended her, she would easily burst into tears. She could be very possessive at times.

Jacinta loved to dance, and she was really good at it. She also liked taking care of the youngest lambs. She would sit with them in her lap, petting them and kissing them. She even carried the little lambs home on her shoulders at night, so that they wouldn't get tired.

One evening, as they were leading the flocks home, Jacinta dropped behind Lucia and Francisco. "What are you doing?" Lucia asked in surprise as she noticed Jacinta walking in the middle of the sheep. "I want to be like Jesus in that holy picture they gave me," Jacinta explained. "The picture has Jesus right in the middle of all the sheep. And he's carrying one of them in his arms."

Francisco was slower and more thoughtful than Jacinta. His dark eyes were usually full of fun and mischief. Although he had good ideas, he preferred to let Lucia take the lead. He was very sensitive to the feelings of others and liked to let them have their own way—except when it was a matter of right and wrong.

Francisco enjoyed playing with the other village boys. And he never minded when he lost a game. Some of the other boys would take advantage of his good nature, and demand that the game be played over if Francisco had happened to win it. He would give in at once, saying, "All right; it doesn't matter to me."

Francisco loved animals. He used to roll snakes and lizards around with a stick and make them drink sheep's milk that he poured into a hollow of rock. He liked to bring these pets home. But they were never very popular with his mother. Mrs. Marto seemed to always be exclaiming, "Francisco, get that snake out of here!"

Although he could be mischievous, Francisco was kind, both to people and to animals. One day he met a boy who had caught a little bird. "Don't keep him like that," Francisco pleaded. "Can't you see how sad he is? Let him go!"

"I won't," the boy retorted, "not unless you buy him from me." And Francisco did just that—with the little bit of money that he had.

In the countryside, Francisco hunted out the dens of rabbits, foxes and porcupines

among the bushes, waded in the clear mountain brooks and sat under chestnut trees, playing his homemade flute and mimicking birdcalls.

He loved to look at the sun, which he called the "lamp of God." How beautiful it was when it rose in the morning, transforming drops of dew into shimmering diamonds, or when it set in the evening and its fiery brilliance blazed from the windowpanes of houses up and down the mountain slopes. What great bursts of light it sent out just before darkness came to swallow up the earth. "No lamp is as beautiful as the Lord's!" Francisco would declare to Lucia and Jacinta.

"I like our Lady's lamp better," Jacinta would answer. (This was her name for the moon.) "It's not hot like our Lord's. It doesn't burn us."

All three children appreciated the natural beauty that surrounded them. But very soon they would see things far more wonderful....