

Brief History of the Foundation and Charism  
of  
Monastery Pius XII, Fatima  
Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary

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*“Love is a fire no waters avail to quench,  
no floods to drown;  
for love,  
a man will give up all that he has in the world,  
and think nothing of his loss.”  
Song of Songs 8:7*

## Introduction

Every monastery is born of Divine Love – the Love that poured forth from the pierced side of Christ crucified. From the Cross-, Christ foresaw each of our monasteries and every soul He would one day invite to enter into that ‘life-giving wound’ in His Heart. We cloistered contemplative Nuns are called to enter and to dwell in the pierced side of Christ. There we find His Sacred Eucharistic Wounded Heart overflowing with love and mercy for us and for all humanity. And deep within His Heart – as the disciples in the inner Garden or on Mt Tabor - we seek, and we ponder and call upon the WORD so that as it goes “forth from the mouth of God it does not return empty but accomplishes what it was sent to do”.

That is the origin and fount of life for all of us. Yet, of course, each monastery has a particular story to tell. This story is a ‘revelation’ of the mystery of God’s love in a certain time and place and to chosen individuals.

## Brief History

To tell our story it is necessary to briefly review some history of the Dominican presence in Portugal.

The sons of St Dominic arrived in Portugal in 1217 and established the first convent at *Serra de Montejunto*. This was followed by others in rapid succession. In 1385 the famous battle of Aljubarrota was fought very near the hamlet of Fatima. The Portuguese placed their cause in the hands of Our Lady, Patroness of Portugal, and obtained a victory. Their independence from Spain was thus secured. In thanksgiving, King John the First fulfilled his vow to Our Lady and made plans to build the great monastery of Santa Maria da Vitória in Batalha. This monastery was entrusted to the Dominican Order and became the center of Dominican life in Portugal. At one time, it is said that 300 friars lived there. From here they went forth to preach and, in a particular way, they preached the Holy Rosary. Portugal was already known as the “*Terra de Santa Maria*” (Land of Holy Mary) yet with the presence and preaching of the Rosary by the Dominicans in this region of the country, we could say, as did the Dominican Archbishop Finbar Ryan, that it had also become the



“*Terra do Santissimo Rosario*” (Land of the Most Holy Rosary). The Portuguese Dominicans embraced the preaching of the Holy Rosary. The result was that the everyday lives of the local people became imbued with this prayer and even today the custom remains among the elderly of measuring distances by the number of Rosaries one could pray while traveling from one place to another.

## Change

History continued until a major political shift occurred in the year 1834 when all Religious were expelled from Portugal and their property was confiscated by the government and sold in order to help finance the state.

In the late 1800's a few Dominicans began very slowly to emerge again in Portugal. They were associated with the Irish Dominican Fathers of *Corpo Santo* in Lisbon or the Irish Sisters of the College of *Bom Successo*, since these religious were the only ones not affected by the government suppression. However, in 1910, with the rise of the Republic and its anti-clerical bias, all religious were again suppressed. Consequently, at the time of the Apparitions of Our Lady in 1917, there were only two known Portuguese Dominican Friars in the country. This was in dramatic contrast to the past, which had been so filled with the presence of Dominicans... and so filled with the preaching of Our Lady and Her Holy Rosary.

These two sons of St Dominic were Frei Domingos Maria Frutuoso and Frei José Maria Faria. Frei Domingos Maria had returned to Portugal in 1913 and was teaching at Bom Successo. In 1920 he was appointed Bishop of Portalegre. He died in 1949. History tells us that while he served as Bishop, D. Domingos was not permitted to work for the restoration of the Province. Frei José Maria Faria lived with the Community of *Corpo Santo* and died in 1935. It is interesting that Frei José Maria had the custom of making rosaries to sell in order to help support new vocations that might come.

### Beginning the Restoration

In 1948, at the request of Fr. Emmanuel Suarez, OP, the Master of the Order at that time, three religious from the Province of Canada came to Portugal to assist with the restoration of the Province. Fr. Pius Marie Gaudrault, former Dominican Provincial of Canada came with Fr. Louis Marie Sylvain and Fr. Gerard Reed. Fatima was chosen as the center of the Province. It was here that Our Lady had announced Her title – *Lady of the Rosary* - so dear to Dominicans. As mentioned earlier, Fatima was a very short distance, about 8 km from the former center of the Province at Batalha...where, for centuries, the Dominican Friars had so zealously preached the Holy Rosary.

It was Fr. Pius Marie's wish to see all the branches of the Dominican Order in Fatima "*all around our beloved Mother, the Queen of the Most Holy Rosary*". Also, he thought to fulfill the Most Holy Virgin's request for the Rosary in a perpetual way. Thus, in 1949, Fr Gaudrault invited Mother Mary Louis Bertrand to make a foundation of the Perpetual Rosary Nuns in Fatima. The Perpetual Rosary Sisters had been founded in France in 1880. Mother Louis Bertrand, from the Monastery in Camden (NJ) USA, had already founded monasteries in Syracuse (New York), Rome (Italy) and Glasgow (Scotland). The Fatima foundation would be her last and her "*Benjamin*", as she used to say.

This story is a beautiful witness to the loving collaboration and complementarity between the sons and daughters of St. Dominic. Like our holy Father St. Dominic, Fr Gaudrault was inspired to entrust the work and the success of the restoration of this ancient and once so flourishing Province to the prayers and hidden sacrifices of the Nuns. On 16 June 1954 with the blessing and the name of the *Pope Pius XII*, our monastery opened. Last year we had the great joy of celebrating the anniversary of the first 50 years of Dominican Rosary life in Portugal.

Our Rosary Community in Fatima has been international from the beginning. At one time there were Sisters from 8 different nations. Today, there are seven nations represented: Portugal, Italy, Ireland, England, Philippines, Sri Lanka and the United States. In Community English is spoken while we naturally try always to assimilate the Portuguese language and culture.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a few words about the message of Fatima and our holy Father St. Dominic. Centuries ago, as we know, St. Dominic with sighs and tears of deep compassion used to pray: “Oh Lord! What will become of poor sinners!” He spared no effort, lost no opportunity to do penance: all with the joy of one who lives in the light and the beauty of the Face of Christ our Saviour.

In Fatima, the Most Holy Virgin, in the radiance of Her beauty, asked the three Little Shepherd children at the first Apparition, if they were willing to suffer and to pray for poor sinners. They agreed. Blessed Jacinta, only 7 years of age, used to weep and pray in words similar to our holy Father Dominic: “Poor sinners! We have to pray and make many sacrifices for them!”

In our Dominican life in Fatima we continue to imitate our holy Father St Dominic in his consuming compassion for poor sinners and we realize more and more how closely the Message of Fatima, in its evangelical and catechetical dimensions, is aligned with our Dominican mission.

At the beginning of this brief story of our monastery I spoke of the fact that we all trace our origins to the same Fount of Divine Love, the pierced Heart of Christ our Saviour. From the ‘*altar of the Cross*’ new life comes forth. We Dominicans, called to live in Fatima, the international Marian Shrine known as the ‘*altar of the world*’, contemplate the beauty of the face of Christ – in a special way *with Mary* – the “*model or icon of Christian contemplation*”. We learn to see Christ in His mysteries through “...the *tender gaze* of Mary as She looked at JESUS upon His birth in Bethlehem...the *questioning look* in the episode of the finding in the temple...the *penetrating gaze* at Cana...the *look of sorrow* especially beneath the Cross and finally, the *radiant gaze* on Easter morning with the joy of the Resurrection. Mary lived with her eyes fixed on Christ, treasuring His every word, keeping all these things, pondering them in Her Immaculate Heart...” (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae, 18*).