

A close-up, high-angle photograph of a complex mosaic floor. The mosaic is composed of numerous small, irregular tiles in various shades of gold, silver, and red. The tiles are arranged in intricate patterns, including a central area with a grid of larger, more uniform tiles, and surrounding areas with smaller, more varied tiles. A prominent red diagonal line runs across the lower right portion of the image. The overall effect is one of rich texture and historical artistry.

A miraculous mosaic



On the thirteenth day of May 1917, three young children Lucia de Jesus dos Santos (aged 10), Francisco Marto (aged 9) and Jacinta Marto (aged 7) were startled by a vision that they described as being “a lady brighter than the sun itself.” The vision appeared above a small ledge which is now the location of the ‘Chapel of the Apparitions’. This incident occurred in Cova da Iria, a neighbourhood of Fatima in Estremadura, Portugal.

The apparition became known as Our Lady of Fatima. In subsequent years between four and five million pilgrims journeyed annually to the small basilica that was erected on the spot. The flow of pilgrims has never ceased, spurred on by the apparent “miracle of the sun”, which occurred five months after the original encounter. Many of the 50,000 visitors who flocked to the site on 17 October claimed to witness a strange phenomenon, which was promised by the Lady to the three small children.

The importance of Fatima to the Catholic Church at both a national and an international level cannot be overestimated.

For years many visitors to the site had to withstand freezing cold temperatures in winter time and in the 1990s an international design contest was launched to find a plan for the development of a new Church of Fatima.

The new church had to hold 10,000 worshippers, a difficult task which had to be compatible with the local environment and the context and harmony of the surroundings.

The winning architect from Greece, Alexandros Tombazis created a church, which did not overpower the landscape in spite of its size.

The new building is a 125 square metres in diameter. It is supported by two horizontal pillars. With an average height of 15 metres, the church can be accessed by 13 doors, including 12 bronze doors, which are dedicated to the apostles and a vast central door which is dedicated to Christ.

The new place of worship was named the Church of the Holy Trinity of Fatima. Construction commenced in 2003 when the Rector of the Sanctuary of Fatima laid the first stone which he personally received from the hands of Pope John Paul II. The new church was inaugurated on 13 October 2007 as part of the celebrations commemorating the 90th anniversary of the first appearance of the Madonna.

The cost of the entire project exceeded 60 million euro upon completion. The church features various types of limestone sourced from local quarries, including Vidraco de Ataija used for decorative cornices and around windows, and a cream version of the same stone for internal and external paving.

The engineers made a specific request for Mapei to provide precise advice in regard to choosing the right adhesive for each stone and each location. To satisfy these requirements Mapei conducted precautionary analysis of the material in the company’s research and development laboratories located in Milan.

The objective was to analyse the dimensional behaviour of the stone with a view to choosing an entirely compatible adhesive.

As a result more than 8,000 square metres of stone was laid in the ‘Chapels of Reconciliation’, the Refectory, the corridors and the internal flights of steps.




The mosaic

As the project approached its conclusion the designers recognised that the central nave required a visual reference point that would be highly emotive.

Enter Father Marko Ivan Rupnik, who embarked upon the task of designing a 500 square metre large terracotta and gold panel behind the altar which would be representative of the message from Our Lady of Fatima that appeared to be inspired by Chapter 22 of St John’s Apocalypse.

The panel was created on a substrate of metallic mesh which was mechanically fixed to a tubular steel structure. The surface was levelled with Mapei’s Nivoplan levelling mortar and a special synthetic latex Planicrete, which was produced by Mapei. Isolastic, a flexible latex was added to enhance the bond and improve deformability and the surfaces waterproofing capacity. Using these products a continuous wall 5 cms thick was created.

The terracotta tesserae were installed using Kerabond adhesive + Isolastic. Because this type of mosaic remains ungrouted the colour which appears through the joints must remain as neutral as possible. This was handsomely achieved by using white Kerabond. In the spaces between the tesserae white Nivoplan was mixed with Planicrete to produce a trowelled stucco finish which was deftly painted.

This remarkable mosaic was designed by Centro Ezio Aletti (Pontificio Istituto Orientale) supervised by Father Marko Ivan Rupnik. 

A short time after the appearance of the apparition on 13 May 1917, Francisco and Jacinta fell victim to the influenza virus which claimed millions of lives worldwide. Remarkably Lucia passed away aged 97 on 13 February 2005. She was laid to rest at Fatima on 20 February 2006 next to her cousins. A major movie entitled The 13th day will be released late in 2009.

RIGHT: The mosaic was fixed to a substrate created from Mapei’s Nivoplan with added Planicrete, before it was smoothed with Nivoplan and Isolastic. The terracotta tesserae were painstakingly adhered using Kerabond. An intriguing stucco finish was created using white Nivoplan and Planicrete, which features between each tesserae. These spaces were neatly painted.

LEFT & ABOVE: A fabulous terracotta and gold mosaic which adorns the nave of the Church of the Holy Trinity of Fatima in Portugal. More than four million pilgrims visit this site annually.