

## Mary in the Year of Faith Part 6 of 8 - The Assumption

### Introduction

“The law of prayer is the law of belief” is a saying that owes much to Augustine and the theological battles of the fifth century. It implies the basis of doctrines can be seen in popular consensus as shown in liturgical celebration, of feasts in honour of Mary. Pius XII appealed to this when he defined the Assumption of Mary.

Two dogmas clarify one another; the Assumption declaration alludes to the Immaculate Conception: *Mary, immaculate Mother of God, always a virgin, after having completed the course of her earthly life...* The text is interesting for what it does not say: how the Assumption took place, or if Mary really died as her Son did? What does the dogma tell us? That Mary is already part of the new and definitive world of the Resurrection. The power of Jesus’ Resurrection came to seal her earthly existence; Mary is called to and is for us a sign of full communion with God. Like her we are called to the resurrection of body and soul. The Assumption tells us the importance of the body, destined also to rise. The dogma was defined at the end of a decade that saw millions die in WWII; the atrocities of the holocaust; the rise of atheistic existentialism.

### Assumption and Resurrection

The Assumption sends us back to the Resurrection of Christ who opened the way to life. Being first, he brought victory over death. When we assert that we believe in the resurrection of the body, we believe in the passage from death to life, that like Mary, we are caught up into the victory of Christ, the firstborn from the dead.

Mary’s Assumption is not in the Scriptures; but because of the early belief in Mary’s extraordinary holiness and her place in God’s plan, it was believed that she who was exceptional all through her life, must have had an exceptional final destiny. It took 500 years for the Assumption to take on a form free of the bizarre and legendary details in the apocryphal writings, lilies in the tomb, the apostle Thomas coming back late from India to see the body; late for the Resurrection appearance of Jesus, he is late for the Assumption. In the East, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, there was a feast of the *Falling Asleep of the Mother of God, the Theotokos, the Ever-Virgin, the All-Holy One*. The feast reached Rome around the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Dogma

This was proclaimed a dogma of faith by Pius XII in 1950, in the words:

*By the authority of Our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own, we proclaim and define it to be a dogma revealed by God, that the immaculate Mother of God, Mary Ever-Virgin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven.*

There are no details about her death, how she died. All the dogma is saying is that she completed salvation, now sharing in the fullness of the resurrection, which God promised all peoples, when God raised Jesus from the dead. *Christ as the first-fruits and then, after the coming of Christ, those who belong to him*, the point of the second reading on the feast of Mary’s Assumption which depends totally on Jesus’ resurrection. She has passed beyond

death and judgment to the glory she now enjoys. It is what we, by God's mercy, hope to eventually enjoy.

Vatican II emphasized the unity of Mary's bodily and spiritual glory in heaven; the Assumption is of 'body and soul'. It is the whole person that will be saved. At death, every person receives a transformed body (not the corpse left behind) and is taken entirely into eternal life, since the soul cannot be separated from the body. Mary was sinless; yet she was not exempt from the final transformation in death. Physical death is not punishment; it belongs properly to the human life that God wills for humankind. After all, Genesis tells of a tree of life *before* the Fall!

### **From Early On**

Our earliest discussion on Mary's death is in the writings of Epiphanius (died 403). He gives two possibilities: either she died or did not; he does not know which. From the 6<sup>th</sup> century we have writings which speak of the Assumption of Mary rather than her Dormition or 'falling asleep', writings only translated after the dogma was defined. They say: *It was fitting that the most holy body of Mary, the God-bearing body, the receptacle of God, which was divinized, incorruptible, illumined by divine grace and full of glory...should be entrusted to the earth for a short while and be raised up in glory to heaven, with her soul pleading to God.* The Greek triad of virginity, grace and incorruption are connected. The East held the feast and the doctrine from early on; in the West, doubts were expressed by Jerome and Augustine.

### **Her Place with us**

Is the Assumption the final step in taking Mary away from us, after the Immaculate Conception showed how different she was from us? The Visitation gives a different picture from virginity, grace and incorruption. It is of two pregnant women, reaching out to touch the new life that is present in the rounding bellies of each one. It is too easy to place Mary in her Assumption as beyond human reach, on her heavenly pedestal as Queen, different and beyond us. The Gospel readings won't let that happen because they are about earth, pregnancy, labour pains, birth, life, death, and social transformation as the rich and powerful are pulled down from their thrones, the lowly are exalted, the hungry are fed, and the rich are sent empty away.

### **Her place with God**

Crowned and glorious, closely associated with the Trinity, caused the Protestant psychologist, Carl Jung, to state that a woman had become the fourth member of the Trinity, thus raising the feminine to the level of the divine. I would rather see all humanity, women and men, raised with her, Mary, woman and mother, to participate in the Godhead. In the body of Mary, glorified, material creation begins to participate in the risen body of Christ. Mary's Assumption anticipates not only the resurrected body of all Christians but the redeemed state of the whole cosmos which is at present subject to decay.

In Mary's Assumption, what is material and beautiful on our earth, as well as what is authentically human, is promised immortality. Perhaps a more appropriate first reading for the Assumption (rather than a passage that originally meant the twelve tribes of Israel as well as the community of the Church based on the twelve apostles - the woman giving birth

to the Messiah), would be from another part of the Apocalypse, “A new heaven and a new earth.”

### **Our Place with her**

I believe that there is always a “So what?” issue in any dogma. What does all this mean to you and to me? In the middle of a century that saw terrible loss of life, the murder of six and a half million Jews, wars beyond human nightmares, ecological destruction, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the continued violation of what is feminine, the Church asserted that in a woman, Mary, Mother of God, we find the ultimate meaning of the whole of reality. Her body is sacred. So is the body of every woman and man on this earth. Her destiny is assumption. It is our destiny and that of our world. Rejoice in the Assumption, for it is God’s promise of life and transformation of all that is worthwhile. Mary’s Assumption does not take her away from us. It places her right at the heart of our own journey. She is a reminder of where we are going. Her being *proclaimed the greatness of the Lord*; so does our own.

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