

Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary August 15, 2016

Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a; 10ab; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Luke 1:39-56

Today we celebrate the feast of Mary's Assumption into heaven. She was a model disciple open to God's grace. The feast celebrates the special place that Mary has in the life of the Church. This place is first of all defined by her being chosen to be the mother of Jesus, his only human parent. This alone gives her a uniqueness which is shared by no other person who has ever lived. By her assumption we can understand that Mary, because of the dignity of her motherhood and her own personal submission to God's will at every stage of her life, takes precedence over everyone in the sharing of God's glory which is the destiny of all of us who die united with Christ her Son. The Gospel narrates the story of Mary's visitation to her cousin, Elizabeth, when both were expecting their first child. The story contains most of the elements which contribute to the status we give to Mary in our Church. Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit, calls Mary the Mother of my Lord and Mary responds with the beautiful hymn, the Magnificat, the hymn of praise. The first reading from the Book of Revelation, tells us that God's faithful people face many challenges on earth. But they will enjoy the final victory. In the second reading Paul tells us that the resurrection of Jesus made him king of heaven and earth. Because of her assumption Mary can be called queen of heaven and earth.

In India we celebrate the Independence Day of our beloved country. We remember the day when India was liberated from the foreign rule and introduced the self-rule to bring about the freedom, equality, progress and growth. We remember those persons who sacrificed their lives for the country, and struggled against all difficulties and hardship to win freedom for us. It is indeed a happy coincidence to celebrate the day on the feast of the Assumption Day. It is to our blessed mother that we dedicate our country as she is our patron. We pray to her that she may protect our country and make our freedom a true and real one.

On November 1, 1950, Pius XII defined the Assumption of Mary to be a dogma of faith: "We pronounce, declare and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma that the immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul to heavenly glory." The Pope proclaimed this dogma only after a broad consultation of bishops, theologians and laity. What the Pope solemnly declared was already a common belief in the Catholic Church. For hundreds of years, Catholics observed the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on August 15, celebrating Mary's being taken bodily to Heaven after her death. We have no real knowledge of the day,

year, and manner of Our Lady's death. The dates which have been assigned to her death vary between three and fifteen years after Christ's Ascension. Mary's tomb was presumably found in Jerusalem. It is believed that Mary died in the presence of all the Apostles, but that after her burial, her tomb, when opened, was found empty. Therefore, they concluded that her body had been taken up (assumed) into heaven. Saint Gregory of Tours provided a rationale for the tradition: since Mary has been preserved from original sin, it is inconceivable to think her sinless body, should decay in the grave.

The Assumption is the oldest celebrated feast day of Our Lady, but its origin is lost in those days when Jerusalem was restored as a sacred city, at the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine. What was clear from the beginning was that there were no relics of Mary to be venerated. In the church all the feast days of Mary mark the great mysteries of her life and her part in the work of redemption. The central mystery of her life and person is her divine motherhood, celebrated both at Christmas and a week later. The Immaculate Conception marks the preparation for that motherhood. The Assumption completes God's work in her since it was not fitting that the flesh that had given life to God himself should ever undergo corruption. The Assumption is God's crowning of His work as Mary ends her earthly life and enters eternity. The feast turns our eyes in that direction, where we will follow when our earthly life is over. There is an important difference, of course, between the ascension of Jesus into Heaven after His Resurrection, and the assumption of Mary. To ascend is to rise up under one's own power; while to be assumed means something that is done to one. Jesus, being the Second Person of the Trinity, had no need of assistance; whereas Mary did not have this power. She was assumed into heaven because of the privilege she enjoyed as the Mother of God and the fact that she was totally sinless and she was rewarded by God for this act. The feast days look to the present and to the future and give us an insight into our own relationship with God.

Today's first reading from the Book of Revelation begins with the encouraging words to the listeners to remain loyal to God. Here we hear of a woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, associating her with the realm of God. She gave birth to a son who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. These words are symbolic, meaning that Jesus gloriously resurrected and He now rules at the right hand of the Heavenly Father. Then again there is the symbol of the great dragon with seven heads and ten horns, signifying the evil and is always eager to destroy the good and perpetuate the evil. The woman is symbolized in Mary and there is the promise of salvation in the world and the full authority of Christ. The reading also tells us of her struggle. The

child is swept up into heaven symbolizing the resurrection and going up to heaven. Dragon symbolizes the struggle that still goes on for the faithful. But God cares for the church just as God cared for Israel in the desert. At the same time in heaven God's victory is already assured.

The second reading taken from the letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us that by his glorious resurrection Christ became the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep. Mary is the first to benefit completely by her assumption. Paul again tells us that all the enemies have been destroyed and God has put them under his feet. The last of the enemy to be destroyed is death and hence it is the victory for the pure and innocent life lived and this is justified in Mary the Immaculate one. When Adam disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, he lost his inheritance to eternal life and death came to human race. Through his resurrection Christ brought life to the world. Indeed Christ is the first one to enjoy a glorious resurrection and is the cause of the resurrection of all. It is only through the Church and the Sacrament of Baptism that we receive our new creation, our new heart and spirit of the godly seed, as our assurance of eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Mary through her assumption is the first to enjoy the fullness of his saving activity. Adam brought death into the world through his sin and Jesus brought life through his sinless life. Mary is now body and soul with Christ in Heaven.

The Gospel of today begins with the story of Mary's visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, when both were pregnant with divine grace and were expecting their first child. Both the women are bearing in their wombs children who when grown up will change the course of world events. The entire encounter is filled with urgency and joy. The story contains most of the elements which contribute to the status we give to Mary in our Church. We have Mary who soon after the Annunciation goes to see Elizabeth who is in need for support. It is highly significant that it is Mary and Jesus who go to visit Elizabeth and John. Already in the womb, Jesus is showing that urge to serve rather than be served. In Mary we see her true nature to serve and she shows her concern towards Elizabeth. As soon as Mary greets Elizabeth two things happen: First, at the presence of Jesus and his mother, the child in Elizabeth's womb jumps for joy. Second, Elizabeth, in turn, recognizes the special position of Mary and her Son: filled with the Holy Spirit, she called Mary the "Mother of my Lord." She is aware of what has taken place in Mary. She also says, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth is deeply moved that it is Jesus and his Mother have come to her and says "how is it that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Further she praises Mary for she had unconditionally accepted to submit to God's plan.

Mary's response is the Magnificat, the song of thanksgiving and her own hymn of praise. Mary praises and thanks God for allowing her to be a privileged servant of God. This is a very ancient Christian hymn modelled on the hymn that Hannah sang to God following the birth of Samuel. She thanks God for allowing her to be a privileged servant of God. The tone of joy and exaltation clearly echo in her words. Mary also praises God for the saving activity that has gone on in the past and will continue in the future. What has begun in the past will be completed in the future by Jesus. It will involve in the reversal of fortunes in Israel, namely the powerful brought down and the lowly raised up. The hymn speaks of three of the revolutions of God: First he scatters the proud in the plans of their hearts. That is a moral revolution. Second he casts down the mighty and exalts the humble. That is a social revolution. Third he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away. That is the economic revolution. God is praised for both past and future victories. Luke tells us in the Gospel that God is famous for doing extraordinary things through ordinary people. He makes use of Mary and Elizabeth to show his great works on earth. Through Mary's Assumption he does the marvel in and through her.

Mary is not equal to Christ, of course. Jesus, though possessing a complete human nature, is the Eternal Word made flesh. Mary is only a creature of God. But she is a unique creature, the highest of all creatures. This is not just because she was born without the handicap of original sin. Eve and Adam were born free of sin as well, but it did not stop them from sinning as soon as they had the opportunity. Mary instead chose, with the help of God's grace, to preserve her God-given purity throughout her life. The bodily corruption of death was not God's original plan. It came into the world through sin, as St. Paul says in the first letter to the Corinthians: "the sting of death is sin". So it is fitting that she who knew no sin should know no decay and no delay in enjoying the full fruits of her son's work. It is fitting that she who stood by Christ under the cross should stand by him bodily at the right hand of the Father. Mary was always "at home" with God's word, she lived on God's word, and she was penetrated by God's word. To the extent that she spoke with God's words, she thought with God's words, her thoughts were God's thoughts, her words, and God's words. She was penetrated by divine light and this is why she was so resplendent, so good, and so radiant with love and goodness. Mary lived on the Word of God; she was imbued with the Word of God. And the fact that she was immersed in the Word of God and was totally familiar with the Word also endowed her later with the inner enlightenment of wisdom.

The Feast of the Assumption has always been loved dearly by the faithful who are children of Mary. It is a sign to us that someday, through God's grace and our

efforts, we too may join the Blessed Mother in giving glory to God. There is nothing in the scripture that speaks of the assumption of Mary. In the Gospel Elizabeth explains the status of Mary: her child is indeed the Lord and Mary herself is the mother of the Lord. But Luke tells us that nothing is impossible for God and the Assumption is that sign. The Assumption is a source of great hope for us, too, for it points the way for all followers of Christ who imitate her fidelity and obedience to God's will. Where she now is, we are meant eventually to be, and may hope to be through Divine grace. Mary is being taken to heaven after her life on earth was ended is the logical outcome of her immaculate nature, uniquely protected by God's grace from personal sin. We seek to imitate her self-sacrificing love, her indestructible faith and her perfect obedience. As with the case of Jesus' resurrection, we need to look at the meaning of what the feast is about rather than being too literal in our understanding of how it is described. By her assumption we can understand that Mary, because of the dignity of her motherhood and her own personal submission to God's will at every stage of her life, takes precedence over everyone in the sharing of God's glory which is the destiny of all of us who die united with Christ her Son.

But Mary's greatness does not stop at the graces and privileges which were showered on her. These, after all, were purely passive in the sense they were gifts given to her. Mary's greatness was not just in being chosen to be Jesus' mother but in her total acceptance of that responsibility in faith and trust, accepting blindly all that it might entail. And, indeed, she had no idea the price she would have to pay to be the mother of Jesus. But she had emptied herself in total service to him and now she is being raised to the highest place among the human race. Through her body, Mary said "Yes!" to God. Through her body, Mary was elevated to a place so high that no creature would ever be able to displace her: she thus became the Mother of God and the Mother of Christ, the incarnate Word. But above all, Mary then became the part of the Holy Spirit, becoming one with him in Christ. Lastly, Mary became the favoured daughter of the Father, who had seen her in himself, in his Son, and in his Spirit for all eternity. Long before time began, the Father had loved Mary and had given her the Glory which she now possesses forever, in her body and her soul! "And Mary said in response, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden."

Pope Benedict XVI tells us that the feast of the Assumption is a day of joy because God has won, Love has won, and it has won life. Love has shown that it is stronger than death, that God possesses the true strength and that his strength is goodness and love. Mary was taken up body and soul into heaven: There is even room in

God for the body. Heaven is no longer a very remote sphere unknown to us. We have a Mother in heaven. And the Mother of God, the Mother of the Son of God, is our Mother. He himself has said so. He made her our Mother when he said to the disciple and to all of us: "Behold, your Mother!" Mary is taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven, and with God and in God she is Queen of heaven and earth. Precisely because she is with God and in God, she is very close to each one of us. She always listens to us, she is always close to us, and being Mother of the Son, participates in the power of the Son and in his goodness. On this feast day, let us thank the Lord for the gift of the Mother, and let us pray to Mary to help us find the right path every day. Today we join Mary in her happiness. We look forward to the day when we too can share it with her.

A story is told about Beethoven, a man not known for social grace. Because of his deafness, he found conversation difficult and humiliating. When he heard of the death of a friend's son, Beethoven hurried to the house, overcome with grief. He had no words of comfort to offer. But he saw a piano in the room. For the next half-hour he played the piano, pouring out his emotions in the most eloquent way he could. When he finished playing, he left. The friend later remarked that no one else's visit had meant so much.

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