

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin August 15, 2015

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

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, body and soul into heaven was one of the last dogmas of the Roman Church to be formulated and declared. It was formally declared by Pope Pius XII in 1950, but the idea of it has been around for centuries. It is not Biblical, meaning that there is no mention of it at all in the Bible, but as early as the 6th century we have writings of St. Gregory of Tours who spoke of Mary being taken up to heaven. Thus, it is one of those long-standing beliefs that have been codified into an essential teaching of the faith. Most Catholics have a strong devotion to Mary going back to their early childhood. Mary has always had a central place in our hearts. This is not true of many of the other Christian faiths, however, who rely less on tradition and only on what is stated in the Bible for their belief system, and so it has always been a bit of a mystery to them why Catholics revere Mary so much. However, our religion is very personal because we have a mother who cares for us. Again, the teachings about Mary seem to be very logical, as we believe in her virgin birth and accept she who had to be mother of God had to be without the stain of original sin to which all of us human beings are subject. It was through original sin that death came into the world according to the Scriptures, and so Mary, being without original sin should not die.

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. For us Christians this is a great feast of hope. Mary entering triumphantly into heaven gives all of us hope in our eventual entry as well. What took place in her will happen to us also at the end times. For the Virgin Mary to be totally free of all traces of original sin, the threefold incorruption that we will one day receive, of body, soul and spirit had to already be present in her. She remains, of course, fully a human being and infinitely lower in dignity than her Son and much closer to us. With us but leading us, she stands in adoration of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. She cannot even in glory be given in any way the worship that is proper to the Persons of the Trinity. What she can do is to intercede for us in our needs, offering her human prayers on our behalf.

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. Here we have the meeting of two women who had experienced the working of God in their lives. They were the chosen ones for God's work. 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. In this first reading we have a description of the birth of a child "who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron". The mother of that child had her child taken away from her, but was herself taken care of by God. This section of revelation has often been seen as descriptive of Mary, the death and glorification of Jesus, and God giving Mary a place prepared by God. In the second reading Paul tells us that the resurrection of Jesus made him king of

heaven and earth. He says that Adam brought death into the world through his sin. But Christ, the new Adam has brought life into the world – he has opened up the gates of heaven again by his resurrection, and will destroy death itself, so that we can be saved. If Mary is without sin, then the gates are open to her without death. 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 proper that the flesh that had given life to God himself should ever undergo any 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. 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.

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 resurrection Christ became the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep. Mary is the first to benefit completely by her assumption into heaven. 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 assumed into heaven body and soul and is with Christ enjoying the total bliss.

Today's Gospel is 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. First, we see Mary setting out with haste from Nazareth to a small town in the hills of Judea, not far from Jerusalem to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with the child we know as John the Baptist. Mary herself, of course, is carrying her own child, Jesus. 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. Mary, too, shares that desire to serve. And, at the presence of Jesus and his mother, the child in Elizabeth's womb jumps for joy. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, excitedly bursts out into praise. She recognizes the special position of Mary and her Son and says she is blessed among women because of the God she carries in her womb. Mary is indeed unique and blessed in being chosen to be the mother of our saving King and Lord. Elizabeth is deeply moved that it is Jesus and his Mother that come to her and John. She indeed feels unworthy that the mother of the Lord has come to visit her. There is a special word of praise for Mary also and Elizabeth says: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." It was Mary who through her yes to God believed as she was the woman of faith.

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 modeled 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 that remains in the present and will continue in the future. What had begun in the past with the divine intervention will be completed in the future in and through 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 fills 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. There will be total transformation of the universe itself. 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.

The feast of the Assumption raises the dignity of Mary and yet Mary is only a creature of God. She is the humble girl of Nazareth and at the same time 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.

Pope Benedict XVI in his reflections 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. Today, let us re-examine our devotion to God's mother, let us try to develop some of her humility, her hope, her acceptance, her love.

Teacher Debbie Moon's first graders were discussing a picture of a family. One little boy in the picture had a different hair color than the other members. One of her students suggested that he was adopted. A little girl said, 'I know all about adoption, I

was adopted.' 'What does it mean to be adopted?' asked another child. 'It means', said the girl, 'that you grew in your mommy's heart instead of her tummy!'

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