

MARY'S ASSUMPTION

In the Assumption into Glory, Mary's life, vocation and mission are sealed with the stamp of eternity. Christian art has surrounded her entry into heaven with scenes of her earthly life: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the suffering under the cross, to illustrate that the meaning of her entire life is revealed only in its fulfillment.

Thus Mary's Assumption must not be understood as the last stage of her pilgrimage, the concluding chapter of a her biography. It is an eschatological mystery of contemplation. Our life on earth is not extended beyond death, but in death God puts his seal of eternity on the search and struggle of our pilgrimage. Heaven is the final revelation of our origin from God.

Therefore Mary's Assumption is also the mystery of the Church. In her glory, Christian faith perceives what God has done for all of us through Jesus Christ. Mary is the icon, the sacred image in which we recognize not only Mary's fulfillment but the assurance of our own destiny.

Access to the Mystery of Mary's Assumption

There is no Historical approach to Mary's Assumption.

-The faith in the Assumption is not based on historical testimony but on a spiritual tradition, the growing insight of the Church into the mystery of Mary under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

-The Council of Trent considered Tradition as essential for the Catholic Church. To exclude misuse, it has limited Tradition to 'saving trough and rule of conduct', coming from Jesus Christ through the Apostles in the 'written books and unwritten tradition'.

-Vatican II includes in tradition 'everything which contributed to the living of a holy life by the people of God and the increase of their faith'.

Tradition of Mary's Assumption

From the **4th century** we find references to the fulfillment of Mary's life which contain two messages:

- 1) the recognition that we have no historical information about Mary's end, and,
- 2) the awareness that her life has found its ultimate fulfillment, without, however, an attempt to spell it out.

-**Epiphanius** tells us briefly: "In this matter (Mary's end) Scripture remains silent on account of the excessive miracle".

-There had been a rumor of Mary having suffered martyrdom, perhaps with reference to Simeon's prophecy that her heart would be pierced with a sword.

Timothy of Jerusalem rejects the rumor and states positively: "The Virgin is immortal as he, who dwelled in her led her to a place of assumption."

-In the **6th century** the feast of Mary's "**Koimesis**" (Latin: **Dormitio**, falling asleep) was introduced, first in the East, later in the West. It celebrated Mary's transition from the earthly life to her glory. The liturgical texts speak both of the glory of the soul and of the preservation of her body from corruption. There remains the ambiguity about Mary's body.

-The texts clearly express three features which remain inseparably connected with Mary's Assumption:

- 1) the participation both of **body and soul** in Christ's victory over death,
- 2) the reason for Mary's glorification is her **unique relationship** to Jesus as his virginal mother,
- 3) Her **intercession** for us.

This last aspect of Mary's Assumption becomes most prominent in the Marian devotion, mostly in the East, through **Germanus**, patriarch of Constantinople (d.733).

-In the West the title of the feast changes from "Koimesis" to "Assumption", the date shifts to the 15th August.

-Still, there remained a hesitation concerning Mary's body. Its assumption was connected with legendary stories. The sobriety of faith formulas would have nothing to do with them. Thus the Martyrology of **Usuardus (9th century)**: "The dormition of Mary, the Holy Mother of God: though her body is not found on earth, the pious mother Church celebrates her memorable memory in such a festive way that there should be no doubt as to the migration of the body.

-From the **10th century** onwards the tradition is unanimous. "...There is no historical witness to the end of Mary's life or to her glorification. Theological tradition, however, having for its basis the Bible reflects on the implications of Mary's unique union with Jesus and sees her sharing with her whole being, body and soul, in the glory of fulfillment."

Definition in "Munificentissimus Deus" 1950

The preparation of the definition goes back to the last century. Ever since the dogma of the Immaculate Conception had been defined, bishops asked for the proclamation of Mary's Assumption as dogma. During Vatican I the requests were intensified. Pope Pius XII took the matter firmly in hand and through the encyclical "Deiparae Virginis" (1946) all bishops were asked for their opinion:

- 1) whether "the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary could be declared and defined as a dogma, and
- 2) whether you wish this, together with your clergy and people.

Out of the 1169 answers, only six questioned the doctrine, and 16 doubted the opportune time of the definition. On the basis of this practical unanimity, the Pope proceeded to the proclamation of the dogma on the feast of All Saints 1950.

Theological Basis is Spelled out First

It is based on the consensus of the whole Church: "The bishops from all over the world asked almost unanimously that the truth of the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in heaven be defined as a dogma of divine and Catholic Faith.

-The text only briefly refers to the biblical texts on Mary, her life and the sword that would pierce her. "The faithful also did not find it difficult to believe that the great Mother of God, like her only Son, left this life. This however, did not prevent them clearly to believe and to confess that her sacred body was not subjected to the corruption of the tomb."

-All Christian life has the promise of final glory, the fulfillment of the whole person, body and soul. In his teaching, Jesus himself stands firmly against the skepticism of the Sadducees who denied and ridiculed the faith in the resurrection (**Mt 12:18-27**). The full meaning of the resurrection is found only in Jesus' own person, "I am the resurrection and the life. He, who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (**Jn 11:25**).

-For Paul, faith in Jesus Christ is inseparable from faith in the resurrection with him: Christian life means sharing in Christ' life. "Now if Christ is preached as risen from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? But if there is no resurrection from the dead then Christ has not been raised" (**1 Cor 15:12f**). Concerning his own life Paul prays: "That I may know the power of the resurrection and may share in his sufferings becoming like him in his death that, if possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (**Phil 3:13**).

-Thus it is biblical teaching that those who are united with Jesus Christ in their life and work are sure to share also in his glory. The same Bible presents Mary linked to Jesus in a unique manner, not only giving him his earthly life but also sharing in his saving mission. So she is with him also in his resurrection.

-The Tradition of the Assumption is substantiated in "Munificentissimus Deus" through the reference to the many Churches dedicated to the Assumption, the rich tradition of Christian art, the dedication of cities, dioceses, and religious communities to this mystery. The Rosary recited by the faithful also contains the mysteries of Mary's Assumption and her Queenship.

-The Assumption has received the approval of **liturgical worship**. The feast was celebrated from the **6th century**. Many homilies about the Assumption are quoted, e.g. one of **John of Damascus**: "It was proper that she who bore the creator as child in her womb should dwell in the divine tents...that the mother of God should possess what belongs to the Son and be praised by every creature as God's mother and handmaid."

Question of Mary's Death

The question as to whether Mary died, was deliberately left open in the definition. The text speaks of the Assumption thus: when the course of her earthly life was finished". Some theologians argued that Mary's freedom from original sin implied also her freedom from death because death came as a punishment for sin (Gen 2:17). Out of consideration for these theologians the text remained non-committal.

-However, we would argue: Mary shared in all trials of our human family; hence she also experienced death, just as Jesus her Son died though he was not under the sway of original sin.

The Definition

"We proclaim, declare and define as a dogma revealed by God: 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."

-The addition of Mary's special titles: "Virgin" and "Mother" indicates the intimate connection of her Assumption with the virginal motherhood. Still, the Assumption is not presented as a theological conclusion from other prerogatives but stands in itself as revealed truth.

-What "glory in heaven" implies: eternal life, beatific vision, communion of Saints, is unfolded in general eschatology.

Two Crucial Questions

1) How can we conceive the bodily resurrection of the dead?

The Bible sees the human being in his personal wholeness, comprising his entire life: body, mind and spirit. In death he goes to **Sheol**. A shadowy existence separate from God and real life. The prophets begin to see God's power revealed in ransoming men from Sheol: "Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death: O death, where are your plagues: Sheol, where is your destruction? (**Hos 13:14**). **Ezekiel** (Ch. 37) sees the vision of the dry bones awakened to new life. **Daniel** sees the resurrection already in a wider context, related to judgment: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:2).

-To whom shall she belong in the resurrection: In his answer **Jesus** points at the power of the living god: "He is not God of the dead but of the living!" (Mk 12:24, 27)

-For **Paul**, it does not mean the revival of the earthly, physical body, but bodily existence in a form beyond earthly experience: "What is sown is perishable, what

is raised is imperishable...It is sown as a physical body, it is raised as a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:42-44). The same person who died rises in a new form of life.

-**A.M. Bermejo** describes it as follows: "We shall not be resuscitated, we shall be raised.. At the funeral we bid farewell to the corpse, and this farewell is not temporal, but definite and final. We shall not pick up that body again...We should stop speaking of the resurrection of the body and should speak instead, in biblical fashion, of the resurrection of the dead or, better still, of the survival after death...At death we shed the body but we do not shed our corporality, we rather assume it into the life of the resurrection, a new body, a new man."

-Also "**Munificentissimus Deus**" speaks about the crowning glory of her privileges to be preserved from the corruption of the tomb" (though this is not part of the definition).

-**Paul** knows two forms of bodily existence, the natural body by which we are similar to Adam and the spiritual body in the likeness of the man from heaven, of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:44-49). The person is the same, the form of bodily existence differs.

-Thus we may assume that the material elements of Mary's earthly body remain subject to the laws of nature and are dissolved, but that in her Assumption, her entire being, body and soul, as it was involved in the conception and motherhood of Jesus, as she lived her earthly life, is fulfilled in God's glory; she is the perfect redeemed beyond corruption and death.

2) Is Mary's Assumption to Glory "when the course of her earthly life was finished" a Privilege?

The body is constituent not only of the individual life but it is also the medium of activities, influences, relationships that make the human person the centre of an infinite network of dependencies, communication, and collective efforts which constitute a human society and history. This concreteness and complexity of life is not left behind in death, but becomes each one's final condition before God.

-Does the resurrection of the dead take place at the moment of individual death or at the conclusion of human history? In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, both are presented in their final condition after they die, **Lazarus** in Abraham's bosom and the rich man in distress, separated by a chasm from Abraham (Lk 16:19-31). On the cross Jesus promises the **thief** the immediate reward: today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43).

-**Paul** sees in death the fulfillment of the union with Jesus: in the insecurity of his trial, whether he will be acquitted or condemned, he writes: "I am torn between the two; I desire to be with Christ which is better by far" (Phil 1:23).

-**Ratzinger**, however, gives strong reasons against the idea of resurrecting at the hour of death. The New Testament takes up the Jewish tradition of the resurrection on the last day. The ultimate realization of human existence seems

possible only at the end of time, when the history of all creation is fulfilled. Every human life is woven into history. I cannot consider my life truly concluded "as long as people on account of me still suffer" or as long as the love and care of my earthly life still are effective.

-We abstain from anthropological explanations of the final fulfillment; we remain on the level of faith. We turn to **Jesus**, the Risen Lord: his earthly life, which ended on the cross and was fulfilled at Easter. No his real presence and mission in the world begins. The paschal mystery has not separated him from the world which he came to save. Only as the Risen Lord is he truly Immanuel, God with us, giving life to all who believe.

-And so it is with Mary. Her earthly life concluded at the hour of her death, but from early times, her glorious Assumption was connected with the intercession for her children. Her Assumption into glory, body and soul, is the beginning of her presence in the Church and her continuous intercession.

-Mere knowledge of the fact that Mary has been taken up with her body into heaven is of no great dogmatic relevance. What is of great importance to us, dogmatically speaking, is that in virtue of her singular election she has become the visible and perfect guarantee of our own resurrecting. She has been exalted as a token before all nations: in her we recognize our own personal grace and divinization.

Mary's Assumption and the Final Glory of the Church

The significance of Mary's Assumption for the Church has been expressed in the patristic tradition and the liturgy. Mary is **typos** of the Church; in the contemplation of her glory the Church celebrates her own fulfillment.

-The Assumption is a feast not only of Mary, but of the Church.

Protestant protest

-It is anti-biblical: If Mary through the unbiblical assertion of her Immaculate Conception and of her Assumption is taken from the coherence with mankind, raised above the Saints and Angels, and even as "Mediatrice and Co-redemptrice" is placed at the side of Jesus Christ, the biblical picture of Jesus' mother is destroyed.

-It is a misuse of papal authority: If today the Pope as supreme teacher of the Roman Church makes an article of faith out of these legends of Mary's Assumption, and makes the eternal salvation of the faithful dependent on it, then even in the Catholic doctrinal tradition a deep change has taken place. The Pope relinquishes the principle which was accepted so far that only that is truly Catholic which everywhere and always and by all has been believed.

-The **Orthodox churches** objected not against the doctrine but against the definition as it has no basis in the Bible.

Conclusion

The dogma of Mary's Assumption epitomizes the core of our Christian faith, the fulfillment of God's saving work through Jesus Christ for all who believe in him. Mary is redeemed. In her we see the redeemed world which, in its turn, becomes channel of God's redeeming love for the world. The dogma of the Assumption contains the simple, yet startling truth that life is more than what can be seen. It is fulfilled and transformed in the embrace of God's love.