

Assumption 2019

The dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was infallibly defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950. Before the formal promulgation of the doctrine, Pius sponsored a worldwide survey of the Catholic people, consulting the faithful to see whether they would sanction this teaching and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

The roots of this dogma in the tradition of the Church are old and deep. The Holy Father was certain a doctrinal definition would give voice to something the Catholic people, since ancient times, had never ceased believing. The Feast of the Assumption has been celebrated since the fourth century, and has been handed down to each generation ever since.

So what precisely does the dogma of the Assumption teach? That Mary was raised in heavenly glory in body and soul at the end of her earthly life, therefore Mary did not have to wait for the final resurrection of the body, and her remains were spared corruption.

The Church realizes this assertion can strike the contemporary mind as: bizarre, mythological, naïve, and even pre-scientific.

Greek philosophy tends to construe salvation as an escape of the soul from the prison of the body. In one of the best-known dialogues of Plato, "On the Soul," Socrates urged his friends not to mourn over his coming death but to see it as a much longed for liberation. This philosophy is alien to biblical teaching which does not envision salvation as a separation of the soul from the body, but rather a transfiguration of the entire self. In scripture, both the Book of Revelation and the Second Letter of Peter record not of an escape of the soul from the body, but entering "a new heavens and a new earth." (2PTR 3:13)

The Assumption describes the full salvation of THE prime disciple of Jesus – Mary's entry, in the fullness of her person, body and soul, into the presence of God. At the end of the Creed, we speak of our hope for "the resurrection of the body." Mary, assumed body and soul into heaven, has experienced precisely this kind of resurrection and has become the sign of hope for the rest of the human race to follow.

If we are to respond adequately to the skeptics, a second observation must be made. When we speak of the Assumption, we are not envisioning a journey Mary made through space, as if Mary flew through the sky. The "heavens"

quote/unquote, are a rich and consistent biblical symbol for the transcendent, for a manner of existence that lies beyond our familiar dimensions of space and time. The Assumption of Mary means the Blessed Mother was “elevated,” in the totality of her being, from the dimension of Earth, to the higher dimension of Heaven.

A comparison would help here. Think of a square, a circle and a triangle plotted in a two-dimensional plane. And now imagine these figures elevated to a third dimension and are now a cube, a sphere and a pyramid. They have not lost their former identities but have been heightened, deepened and perfected.

It’s the same with Our Blessed Mother. Mary, who exists in the higher dimension of heaven, intercedes, helps and prays for us. The skeptical unbelievers who only know this world, see this as ridiculous. For us believers, the doctrine of Mary’s Assumption both whets our appetite for this higher world, and fills our minds as we contemplate it.

At this point, I’d like to offer a word of reflection on something that is related to the dogma of the Assumption but is not formally contained within it. And that is the teaching concerning the “dormition” or the “falling asleep” of Mary. Did

Mary, at the end of her days, die in the ordinary sense or fall asleep in the Lord? The Church does not officially tell us.

Some orthodox Catholic theologians, including Bishop Robert Barron, who is a 21st century Fulton Sheen, well known author and auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, explain the end of Mary's days as Mary did not so much die in the ordinary sense but fell asleep in the Lord. It sounds strange, but actually it conveys something of great spiritual importance. Death can be taken in a purely biological or physiological sense to mean the cessation of bodily activity: heartbeat, breathing, brain waves, and so on. Or it can be construed in a wider psychological and spiritual sense to mean the full range of feelings, reactions, and fears that accompany biological death. At the prospect of death, most of us back off in terror, either at the mystery of it all (the unknown is what frightens us the most) or because of the judgement that awaits us. I talked about this in last Sunday's homily. Most of us don't even want to think about it. In either case, our fright is prompted by sin, a lack of confident trust in the love of God. What would it be like for a sinless person to enter into death? Would not he or she face it with utter calmness of spirit, the way most of us falls asleep each night, convinced we will wake

up the next morning? In this sense, the Blessed Mother did not die, but fell asleep, confidently expecting to wake up in heaven, which is not altogether an unreasonable way to speak of the end of Mary's earthly life.

Other theologians, including Saint John Paul II, teach that Mary did die a "natural death," asserting the Assumption is essentially an event of grace including, as was the case for Jesus her Son, both a death and resurrection.

After the resurrected Christ, the assumed Mary is a sign of the dignity of persons, of their future destiny to glory. Both the Resurrection and the Assumption teach us that the destiny of humankind, made in the image and likeness of God, is not an undoing of personhood and a cessation into nothingness, but rather, to quote St. Paul, but an arriving to "the full stature of Christ," (EPH 4;13). Mary, in her glorification, is the sign of the completion of the human vocation, the only one who fulfills this vocation: to be enveloped in the glory of the living God, to resonate the hymn of pure praise, and to respond in pure love.