

THE ASSUMPTION - A FEAST OF HOPE

This year the feast of the Assumption of Mary into heaven falls on a Sunday, something which is always very fortunate for such important feasts usually fall midweek and many Catholics simply are unable to attend Mass on those days because of work or other good reasons. They miss out on some of the great mysteries of our faith and a chance to learn more of our faith. The Assumption of Mary into heaven which was believed from the earliest times of our Church and which over the centuries was simply accepted as true doctrine is backed up with little real evidence. A legend of those earliest days claims that when Peter found out that Mary in her old age was coming close to dying, he wanted to see her before that happened. He traveled as quickly as he could to where she was staying, watched over by John the Apostle as Christ on the cross had asked him to do. But when he arrived he was too late for she had died peacefully a day earlier. Peter asked to see her tomb, similar to the tomb of Christ, a hollowed out small cave-like hole sealed with a rock at its entrance. He asked if he could at least have one last look, but when they opened the tomb, it was empty, with the burial cloths neatly folded lying there, just like the tomb of Christ when Peter and John looked in that Easter morning so long ago. Immediately they knew that Jesus had come to take her into his heavenly kingdom. The news spread and because of the witness of Peter and John it was believed and very quickly became simply a part of the Catholic faith.

When I was studying theology prior to becoming a priest, the professor with a slight grin on his face, said he was going to give us a proof of the Assumption of Mary into heaven based on basic human behavior! Every culture, every race, every nationality has always produced people who are out to make a fast buck. This phenomenon hardly needs any proof as almost everyone has either run into such a person or has heard many a story of such people. During the period of the Crusades, many a crusader was approached by some such person willing to sell him some relic or some important evidence of an Apostle, of a saint or some such similar early art or proof of ancient belief. The result is that today we have 23 bodies of the Apostles, enough relics of the true cross to build a ship, two heads of John the Baptist etc. The list is long! But no one has ever attempted to sell some true relic of the body of the Virgin Mary. Such a deal would be immediately scorned. And so today we have some of her milk, pieces of her clothing, pieces of the house she lived in - again the list is long. The faith of true believers simply would not tolerate a true relic of Mary, a piece of bone, a piece of her hair. That would never be believed to be true.

It was not until the twentieth century in 1950 that Pope Pius XII officially and infallibly as Pope, declared that Mary was assumed into heaven body and soul. This certainly was no surprise to any believing Catholic. But it was a genuine surprise that he would do this. Thus the big question was why now, why today? As one looks back over the beginnings of the twentieth century, there was the first true world War raging all over Europe, and it lasted for at least four years, in some places longer! Finally there was the armistice. Germany was defeated, and the world breathed a sigh of relief. But peace was not destined to last for long. Ten years after the war Adolph Hitler began to rise and a new ruthless dictatorship began in Germany. The atrocities that this movement forced on so many simply boggles the mind. The hatred it inspired was diabolical. Eventually, as it was destined to do, it evoked a second world war more horrible than the first. In a relatively short time, it began to involve the whole world, especially when the orient and Japan began to take advantage

of all the strife to achieve their ends. The United States, like or not, quickly became embroiled in the mess. Finally, after untold suffering and the wasting of so many human lives, it came to an end. Peace was ever so close and everyone was not just physically but more importantly spiritually totally exhausted. While there was no actual fighting going on except in many isolated places, everyone not only in our country but all through Europe and elsewhere was thankful for the respite, but a hope for a true peace, peace with justice, peace with true trust, peace with some basis of love, peace with a real promise of lasting for a long time still seemed more of a dream than a real honest hope.

All this no doubt was one of the basic causes for the Pope to finally take some steps to renew hope, to renew trust, to renew faith in a loving God. And what better way than to emphasize the true nature of the Assumption of Mary into heaven, its fundamental effect on one's faith and hope in a loving God. Jesus, God made man, walked on this earth for three years spreading a message of love and trust in God and then ultimately gave his life, suffering hateful tortures, and then finally enduring the degrading and shameful agony of the cross to undo the harm of original sin and give all mankind a true hope of eternal joy in the ultimate kingdom of heaven. All this because God, and Jesus who was God made man, so loved the people he had created and would create until the end of the world. The unfathomable love of God is beyond human comprehension, yet because of what Jesus has done out of love somehow begins to make sense of it all. As this happens, one's hope for a true peace, for a true love, for a true close relationship with the Lord slowly begins to take hold. Humans are slow to learn and perhaps even a bit afraid to let the love of Jesus, of God, really enter into their lives. Perhaps it is the fear of the unknown.

One must remember and never forget that Jesus died but then rose from the grave as he had promised as proof of all his claims being true and all his teaching to be really the word of God. And then he sent the Holy Spirit upon his disciples to give them a deeper understanding and remembrance of all that he had taught them along with a deeper knowledge and belief in the scriptures. To give the final touch to his work here on earth, Jesus then did what no one expected! He had given his Apostle John the commission to take care of her here on earth which he did, finally taking her away from Jerusalem as a persecution began against this new religion started by Jesus was spreading farther and faster than the authorities wanted. John took Mary to a safe place either on the island of Patmos or perhaps more accurately on the mainland of modern Turkey or Syria. And it was there that Mary lived out her life and finally died and was buried. Then Jesus came into action and took his mother, body and soul to his Father in heaven where together they made her Queen of Heaven and Earth.

This is the final act of Jesus here on earth to give everyone a true and deep hope that what he promised them was something real and would happen to each human being in the final days. One can only imagine what the feelings of Mary must have been. But then, she was a simple but a most loving woman who simply wanted to do whatever her God wanted. She sought only to be what God had created her to be. She had a deep faith and a love beyond telling. In trying to fulfill to the best of her ability to be what she was created to be, she achieved the ultimate for a human. And she has given us all a renewal of our hope.

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