

## Feast of the Assumption August 15

### 1. The definition

On November 1st 1950, Pope Pius XII defined as a dogma revealed by God and therefore as of divine and Catholic faith "that the Immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever Virgin, when the course of her earthy life was finished, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven"(DS 3903; see LG n.59 and Catholic Catechism n.966).

The importance of the expression "body and soul" is to insist that the whole of Mary's humanity - all that it means to be a human person - is transformed by grace and enjoying the fullness of life in communion with God. She is not some kind of disembodied soul awaiting the resurrection. Through God's loving grace and because of her union with her Son, she is enjoying now the complete human communion with God which is the goal of every person's existence, and for which we all long.

### 2. The grounds for the definition

Pope Pius XII explained his reasons for defining this truth of faith. First of all there is the historical fact that "the universal church, which the Spirit of truth actively and infallibly directs in perfecting knowledge of revealed truths, has manifested in various ways down through the centuries her belief" in Mary's Assumption. As early as the 5th century a feast to celebrate Mary's birth into heaven was celebrated in the Eastern Church on August 15th. It became a universal feast in the 7th century, and has been called the Feast of the Assumption from the 8th century. The Pope declared that the dogma of Mary's Assumption "is founded on Sacred Scripture, is deeply embedded in the minds of the faithful, has received the approval of liturgical worship from the earliest times, is perfectly in keeping with the rest of revealed truth, and has been lucidly developed and explained by the studies of learned and wise theologians".

### 3. An example of the exercise of infallibility

The dogma of Mary's Assumption is an example of the Church's exercise of the divine gift of infallibility, whereby God, who is faithful to his gifts, protects the Church against error in matters of revealed truth. As individual Christians we can all make mistakes. It is even possible for whole areas of the Church to be in heresy, but, as the Second Vatican Council declares: "The whole body of the faithful ... cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of faith (*sensus fidei*) on the part of the whole people, when, 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals"(LG n.12, quoted Catholic Catechism n.92). The Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue in the United States affirmed that both churches: "share the certainty of Christian hope that the Church, established by Christ and led by his Spirit, will always remain in the truth fulfilling its mission to humanity for the sake of the gospel"(The New Dictionary of Theology, Ed. Komonchak, 1987, page 520).

The dogma of the Assumption is also of special interest in that it is an example of a declaration of such a dogma by a Pope. Explaining his reasons for defining the dogma of the Assumption,

Pius XII stated that "the bishops of the entire world almost unanimously petition that the truth of the bodily assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven be defined as a dogma of divine and catholic faith". He was giving expression to the universal faith of the Church.

Papal Infallibility is frequently misunderstood. The Church has never taught that the Pope is infallible as an individual or even as a bishop independent of the Church. The First Vatican Council in 1870, states: "The Roman Pontiff when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when he discharges his office as pastor and teacher of all Christians, and in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals that is to be held by the universal church, through the divine assistance promised him in Saint Peter, exercises that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed to endow his Church"(DS 3074). Vatican II made it clear that only matters of revelation can be infallibly declared (LG n.25). The Pope personally is not infallible. He, like the rest of us, is capable of being wrong. However, our faith assures us that when in communion with all the bishops and faithful of the Catholic world, he defines what is of Catholic faith, we can place our trust in such a definition and know that God has revealed what the Church proposes for our belief (see Catholic Catechism n. 888-892). Pope Pius XII made his solemn declaration concerning Mary's Assumption "by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own". This dogma is of special interest since it is the only generally acknowledged exercise of the infallibility of the papal Magisterium in the 130 years since Vatican I (see *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. Komonchak, 1987, page 519).

#### 4. Special relevance of the dogma of the Assumption

The Second World War ended with the signing that took place on the Feast of the Assumption 1945. The following year Pope Pius XII sent a letter to all the bishops of the world seeking their opinion as to the appropriateness of a solemn definition of the Assumption. The results of that inquiry have already been noted: the Catholic world was overwhelming in expressing its desire that this truth be solemnly declared. There is a direct connection between the horrors of the war and the Papal definition five years later. Never before had human beings been so degraded. Never before had the human body been treated so callously. The doctrine of the Assumption is a statement from the heart of Christendom that the body matters. We believe that whatever people might do to our bodies, God will protect our soul and take us to himself. But we believe more than that. We believe that the human body is created by God, and that our bodies are temples of God's Spirit. Moreover, the goal to which God is drawing us is not a kind of spiritual communion with him in heaven. It is a fully personal communion. Our bodies too - in a way that we cannot imagine - are going to be transformed, like that of Jesus, and we will experience God in a fully human fashion. It is this that is being affirmed by the dogma of the Assumption. If Mary is with her Son in all the fullness of her transformed human person, so it will be for all of us. The body therefore, must be respected as sacred. Through the definition of the Assumption, the Pope declared openly to the world the true horror of the utter disrespect for human life that had characterised the awful first half of this century. Every human being must be respected in his or her whole humanity, for we are all destined, like Mary, to be assumed body and soul into heaven.

The Vatican Council reminds us that: "In Mary the Church ... joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be"(SC n.103). And, with

special reference to the Assumption, the same Council states: "The Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is ... a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of God"(LG.n.68). As the Catholic Catechism states: "The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of all Christians"(n.966).

## 5. A meditation on Mary's longing

The Gospel of John, the beloved Disciple, has Jesus, again and again during his last supper discourse, encouraging his disciples to give expression to the desires of their heart in the trust that he will be listening to them and will meet their longings with his grace. "If you ask me for anything in my name I will do it"(John 14:14). "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for whatever you please and you will get it"(John 15:7). "In all truth I tell you, anything you ask from the Father he will grant in my name. Until now you have not asked anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and so your joy will be complete"(John 16:23-24). A little later, during his Agony, we find him doing what he has asked his disciples to do as he pleads with his Father for life: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine"(Luke 22:42).

Here he teaches us how to pray. We are to express our longings to God with the simplicity and trust of a child. But note the way the prayer itself is purified as it proceeds, reaching a point of perfect acceptance of God's will in the trust that God knows what is best for us. Jesus' prayer was answered, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, in the resurrection (Hebrews 5:7-10). This same childlike trust is beautifully expressed in Psalm 37: "Make Yahweh your joy, and he will grant you your heart's desires. Commit you destiny to Yahweh, be confident in him and he will act ... Stay quiet before Yahweh, wait longingly for him"(Psalm 37:4,5,7). In today's gospel Elizabeth declares that Mary, the Mother of her Lord, is blessed, because :she believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled". Today we celebrate God's response to her ultimate longing.

- Those of you who are mothers or fathers will readily identify with her longing as she awaited the birth of Jesus.
- Try to imagine the longing she experienced during the long, silent years at Nazareth, reaching their climax at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:1-12). She was waiting for the moment of grace when her beautiful Son would share with the world the secrets he had so often shared with her. She wanted the world to know that God is the bridegroom and that he longs for all of us to celebrate life as a wedding feast - a wedding with him made possible by the abundance of his love acting like wine on our spirits. At her prayer Jesus began his public ministry. The longing in her heart that did not give up but kept growing in her heart was honoured by God when the moment was right.
- Try to enter into the longing that broke her heart as she stood beside her Son on Calvary. She so wanted to be with him, to comfort him, but also to encourage him to complete his mission. She was willing to suffer with him, to do anything she could to draw us to learn from him and to receive from him the love that was pouring from his pierced heart. This longing, too, was

honoured by God: she was asked to be our Mother now (John 19:25-27) and to cover us all with her mantle, protecting us with her love till we, too, went through the pains of purification till we could receive and respond to his love.

- Pray to enter the longing that was in her motherly heart as she gathered the disciples around her and prayed for the coming of the Spirit through whom Jesus would be present to us till the end of time (Acts 1:14). Pentecost was God's answer to her prayer, and the birth of the Church of whom the Spirit is the soul.

- Today we celebrate her ultimate longing: to be with her Son. She longed to be with him, in mind and heart and soul and body, and such was the purity of her desire that it was granted. In this, as in everything else, she is the model for all disciples of Jesus, and we celebrate this feast in an especially solemn way because we believe that our longing too will be honoured by God. We are all called to the same intimate communion with Jesus to the measure of our purity and the measure of our longing.

- In today's responsorial psalm (Psalm 45), we contemplate Jesus as king, with his mother standing beside him, awaiting the approach of his bride. The bride is the Church which is told to focus all its attention on Christ who longs to express with her his tender love. Every one of us is invited today to trust the deepest longings of our heart to be united with Jesus and so with the God for whom we are made.

- We sometimes imagine that the rest of us will have to await the end of time. It is important to know that this is only an image to speak of something that we find it impossible to imagine. There is no time beyond death. Every moment of time as we know it, past, present and future, is present to God and so present to eternity, including the moment that we call the end of time. In Mary's case we know in faith that now as we pray, she is enjoying that fullness of communion with Jesus in the glory of God that is the destiny God has for us all. We have every reason to hope that the same is true for the saints, including the saints we have known. There may be a hint of this in a passage from the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse 20:4-6) that comes somewhat later in the book than the passage read in today's Mass. Speaking of the saints, especially the martyrs of the early Church, the author writes:

"I saw thrones, where they took their seats, and on them was conferred power to give judgment. I saw the souls of all who had been beheaded for having witnessed for Jesus and for having preached God's word, and those who refused to worship the beast or his statue and would not accept the brand-mark on their foreheads or hands; **THEY CAME TO LIFE**, and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were over; **THIS IS THE FIRST RESURRECTION**. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection; the second death has no power over them but they will be priests of God and of Christ and reign with him for a thousand years."

He is speaking of especially holy people whose longing for God was so keen that they gave their lives rather than compromise their conscience. They are spoken of as being, like Mary, already part of the resurrection, and as exercising from their communion with God their priestly role of sanctifying this world. This is part of what we mean by the communion of saints.

## 6. Conclusion:

Let us pray that we may share Mary's childlike trust in God as our Father. Let us listen to our heart's desires, and commit ourselves to follow our deepest longings, being willing, like her, to allow the sword to pierce our hearts in the trust that, if we share his passion with Jesus we, too, will share in the glory of his resurrection as we enjoy the fullness of union with God in an eternal communion that knows no end.

Mary's assumption happened because of her longing and her openness to grace. God's offering of grace is always without limit. The only limits are in our willingness and ability to receive. Life will open our hearts if we are willing to suffer the pain that goes along with it. May we learn from Mary, to believe and hope and love, and may our longing too bring us to enjoy with her the communion with Jesus that is our heart's desire and the goal of our existence.