

Solemnity of the Assumption **August 15**

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

This holy day of obligation celebrates the dogma of faith that the Mother of God was taken up to heaven, soul and body, after her earthly life.

This dogma is not documented in Holy Scripture and reliable historical reports as to the place (Ephesus, Jerusalem), the time, and the circumstances of Mary's death are lacking. Still, the fact of her death is almost generally accepted by the Church Fathers and theologians, and is expressly affirmed in the liturgy of the Church. Origen (died 253), St. Jerome (died 419) and St. Augustine (died 430) among others mention the fact of her death incidentally. For Mary, death, in consequence of her freedom from original sin and from personal sin, was not a consequence of punishment of sin but a result of being a descendant of Adam and Eve. However, it seems fitting that Mary's body, which was by nature mortal, should be, in conformity with that of her Divine Son, subject to the general law of death.

The feast of the Assumption was first celebrated, according to historical record, in the early 5th century. By the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Mauricius Flavius (582-602) a Marian Feast on August 15th was formally added to the calendar of the Eastern Church which celebrated the sleeping of Mary (Dormitio). The object of the feast was originally the death of Mary, but very soon the thought appeared of the incorruptibility of her body and of its assumption into Heaven. In the West, St. Gregory of Tours (d. 593) is known to have preached the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption. Rome added the feast to the western calendar in the 7th century. Pope St. Adrian (772-795) changed the original title Dormitio (sleeping) into Assumptio (assumption). In the Liturgical and Patristic texts of the 8th and 9th centuries, the idea of the bodily assumption is clearly attested. Among the advocates of this idea have been St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, St. Bernardine of Sienna, St. Robert Bellarmine, St. Francis de Sales, St. Peter Canisius and St. Alphonse Ligouri.

Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950, promulgated by the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* as a dogma revealed by God that: "Mary, the immaculate perpetually Virgin Mother of God, after the completion of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven."

Direct and express scriptural proofs are not to be had. The possibility of the bodily assumption before the second coming of Christ is not excluded by 1 Corinthians 15:22-24, as the objective redemption was completed with the sacrificial death of Christ, and the beginning of the final era foretold by the prophets commenced. Its possibility is suggested

by Matthew 27:52-53.

There are two Old Testament examples of assumption: Enoch in Genesis 5:24, and Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11. Hebrew tradition also has it that Moses was assumed into God's presence (Deuteronomy 34:5-6).

1st Reading - Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab

When chapter designations were added to the Bible in 1204 by Cardinal Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, the divisions were not all together accurate. Today's reading reflects the proper division of the 11th and 12th chapters of the book of Revelation wherein the last verse of chapter 11 should really be the first verse of chapter 12. To the Jew, the appearance of the Ark of the Covenant would be a wondrous happening and the appearance of the ark would be (and in fact is) described in detail.

11:19a Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple.

The opening of the temple and the sight of the Ark of the Covenant show that the messianic era has come to an end and God's work of salvation has been completed. The ark is the symbol of Israel's election and salvation and of God's presence in the midst of His people. According to 2 Maccabees 2:4-8, Jeremiah placed the ark in a secret hiding place prior to the destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.) and it would be seen again when the Messiah came. John uses this to assure us that God has not forgotten his covenant: he has sealed it definitively in heaven, where the ark is located. The heavenly covenant is the new and eternal one made by Jesus the Christ (see Matthew 26:26-29) which will be revealed to all at His second coming when the Church will triumph. John now proceeds to describe this ark:

12:1 A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

This is not just a sign, it is a great sign, an important sign, central to the interpretation of the prophecy as a whole. Saint John is telling his readers to reflect carefully about the Biblical meaning of the sign.

The figure of the woman has been interpreted ever since the time of the fathers of the Church as referring to the people of Israel, the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Blessed Virgin. The text supports all of these interpretations but in none do all the details fit.

The woman can stand for the people of Israel, for it is from that people that the Messiah comes. Isaiah (26:17) compares Israel to "a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time".

She can also stand for the Church whose children strive to overcome evil and bear witness to Jesus Christ. Following this interpretation Saint Gregory writes “the sun stands for the light of truth, and the moon for the transitoriness of temporal things: the Holy Church is clothed like the sun because she is protected by the splendor of supernatural truth, and she has the moon under her feet because she is above all earthly things”.

The passage can also refer to the Blessed Virgin Mary because it was she who truly and historically gave birth to the Messiah, Jesus the Christ our Lord. Isaiah’s prophecy of the virgin mother (Isaiah 7:14) is the specific Biblical background for Saint John’s vision of the woman as he announces the birth of the warrior king. Saint Bernard comments “the sun contains permanent color and splendor; whereas the moon’s brightness is unpredictable and changeable. It is quite right then for Mary to be depicted as clothed with the sun, for she entered the profundity of divine wisdom much, much further than one can possibly conceive”. The Second Vatican Council has solemnly taught that Mary is a “type” or symbol of the Church, for “in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother. The description of the woman indicates her heavenly glory, and the twelve stars of her victorious crown symbolizes the people of God – the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. And so, independently of the chronological aspects of the text, the Church sees in this heavenly woman the Blessed Virgin. Taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, when her earthly life was over, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of Lords and conqueror of sin and death.”

² She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. ³ Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. ⁴ Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth.

St. John uses symbols taken from the Old Testament. The dragon or serpent comes from Genesis 3:1-24; a passage which underlies all the latter half of the book of Genesis. Its red color and 7 heads with 7 diadems (crowns) show that it is bringing its full force to bear to wage this war. The 10 horns in Daniel 7:7 stand for the kings who are Israel’s enemies: in Daniel a horn is also mentioned to refer to Antiochus IV Epiphanes, of whom Daniel also says that it cast stars down from heaven into the earth (Daniel 8:10). Satan drags other angels along with him as Revelation 12:9 recounts. All these symbols are designed to convey the enormous power of Satan. After the fall of our first parents war broke out between the serpent and his seed and the woman and hers: “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). Jesus Christ is the woman’s descendent who will obtain victory over the devil (see Mark 1:23-26; Luke 4:31-37, etc.). That is why the power of evil concentrates all his energy on destroying Christ (see Matthew 2:13-18) or deflecting Him from His mission (Matthew 4:1-11).

Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. ⁵ She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne.

The birth of Jesus the Christ brings into operation the divine plan announced by the prophets (see Isaiah 66:7) and by the Psalms (see Psalms 2:7-9), and makes the first step in ultimate victory over the devil. Jesus' life on earth, culminating in His passion, resurrection and ascension into heaven, was the key factor in achieving this victory. St. John emphasizes the triumph of Christ as victor, who, as the Church confesses, "sits at the right hand of the father" (Nicene Creed; Acts 2:33).

⁶ The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God.

The figure of the woman reminds us of the Church, the people of God. Israel took refuge in the wilderness to escape from Pharaoh, and the Church does the same after the victory of Christ. The wilderness stands for solitude and intimate union with God. In the wilderness God took personal care of His people, setting them free from their enemies (see Exodus 17:8-16) and nourishing them with manna and quail (see Exodus 16:1-36). It can also represent the flight of the Judean Christians from the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, so that when Jerusalem was destroyed only the apostate (those who had failed to recognize Jesus) rather than the faithful Israel fell victim to the dragon. The Church is given similar protection against the powers of Hell (see Matthew 16:18) and Christ nourishes it with His body and His word all the while it makes its pilgrimage through the ages.

Although the woman in this verse seems to refer directly to the Church, she also in some way stands for the particular woman who gave birth to the Messiah, the Blessed Virgin. She too fled when the dragon possessed King Herod and inspired him to slaughter the male children of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:13-18). As no other creature has done, Mary has enjoyed a very unique type of union with God and very special protection from the powers of evil, death included. Thus, as the Second Vatican Council teaches "In the meantime [while the Church makes its pilgrim way on earth], the Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven, is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come (2 Peter 3:10), a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of god." (*Lumen Gentium*).

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have salvation and power come, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Anointed.

With the ascension of Christ into heaven the Kingdom of God is established and so all those who dwell in heaven break out into a song of joy. The devil has been deprived of his power over man in the sense that the redemptive action of Christ and man's faith enable man to escape from the world of sin. There is now no place for the accuser, Satan, whose name means and whom the Old Testament teaches to be the accuser of man before God (see Job 1:6-12; 2:1-10).

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 15:20-27a

Christ's resurrection is the crowning event of salvation history and man's victory over sin, Satan, and death. As Adam brought death, Christ brings resurrection from the dead. The Christian who is incorporated in Christ by baptism shares in His risen life. The final fruit of redemption in Christ will be realized for the Christian at the Lord's parousia when the dead rise in glory.

²⁰Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

First fruits denotes more than first in time, it is a Jewish cultic term. The offering of the first fruits was the symbol of the dedication of the entire harvest to God. The resurrection of Christ involves the resurrection of all who are in Him.

"Paul says this in order to get at the false prophets who claimed that Christ was never born and thus cannot have died. The resurrection from the dead proves that Christ was a man and therefore able to merit by His righteousness the resurrection of the dead." The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

²¹ For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being. ²² For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life,

This parallelism and contrast between Adam and Christ is a favorite Pauline teaching (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49).

²³ but each one in proper order:

"The fruit of divine mercy is common to all, but the order of merit differs" [Saint Ambrose of Milan (ca. A.D. 380), *On His Brother Satyrus* 22,92]

Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming,

The general resurrection will take place at the second coming of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

those who belong to Christ; ²⁴ then comes the end,

The consummation of time when Christ, having completed His redemptive mission and brought all the elect to the glory of His resurrection, manifests His total victory over the evil spirits. Then, having completed His work, He hands over to His Father the royal authority that was conferred on Him as Savior and head of the Church.

when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power.

These are mythological expressions for forces hostile to authentic humanity (see Romans 8:38-39).

“What rule and power will Christ destroy? That of the angels? Of course not! That of the faithful? No. What rule is it then? That of the devils, about which He says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the principalities, the powers and the forces of darkness in this present age.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 39,6]

25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

The necessity is that of the divine plan as revealed in Psalm 110:1b, which is quoted implicitly.

26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death, ^{27a} for “he subjected everything under his feet.”

By “everything” Saint Paul is referring to all created beings. In pagan mythology, rivalry and strife occurred among the gods and sometimes led to the son of a god supplanting his father. Saint Paul wants to make it quite clear that Sacred Scripture suggests nothing of that kind. No subjection is possible among the three persons of the Blessed Trinity, because they are one God.

“Hence the first step in the mystery is that all things have been made subject to Him, and then He Himself becomes subject to the One who subjects all things to Himself. Just as we subject ourselves to the glory of His reigning body, the Lord Himself in the same mystery subjects Himself in the glory of His body to the One who subjects all things to Himself. We are made subject to the glory of His body in order that we may possess the glory with which He reigns in the body, because we shall be conformable to His body.” [Saint Hilary of Poitiers (A.D. 356-359), *The Trinity* 11,36]

Gospel - Luke 1:39-56

Today as our Gospel reading we hear of the visitation and Mary’s Magnificat.

39 During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

“In haste” can also mean “very thoughtfully”. Luke’s intent in this story is missed if one accentuates Mary’s charity and social concern in visiting her aged pregnant relative. It also strains credulity to imagine a 14-year old Jewish virgin making a four day journey by herself. Luke’s intent in the visitation is literary and theological. He brings together the two mothers-to-be, so that both might praise the God active in their lives and that Elizabeth’s child might be presented as the precursor of Mary’s child. Luke removes Mary from the

scene before the birth of John, so that each birth narrative might have solely the three main characters proper to it: Zechariah, Elizabeth and John; Joseph, Mary and Jesus.

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb,

The wrestling of Esau and Jacob in Rebekah's womb (Genesis 25:22) presents a parallel to the leaping of John: such activity is a foreshadowing of future relationships. The context makes clear that by leaping, John recognizes his Lord, Jesus. Some individuals in modern times have even suggested that John was prostrating himself before Jesus.

and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 cried out in a loud voice and said,

In words recalling Jael's (Judges 5:24) and Judith's (Judith 13:18) liberation of their people, Elizabeth praises Mary, whose contribution to liberation is the birth of the bringer of peace. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit Elizabeth is empowered to interpret the leaping of John. To use medical terms, a 6-month old fetus has recognized a 4-day old zygote – who says life doesn't begin at conception!

"Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

John has leapt in Elizabeth's womb because Mary is the ark carrying their Lord.

44 For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.

John's joy is the appropriate response to God's fulfillment of promise in Jesus.

"[John the Baptist] was sanctified by the Holy Spirit while yet he was carried in his mother's womb. ... John alone, while carried in the womb, leaped for joy; and though he saw not with the eyes of the flesh, he recognized the Master by the Spirit." [Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 350), *Catechetical Lectures* 3,6]

45 Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Mary, as model believer, is praised for her trust in the fidelity of God.

46 And Mary said: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; 47 my spirit rejoices in God my savior. 48 For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.

Mary extols God for what God is doing for women and men through her child.

49 The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

The lowliness of Mary is contrasted with the might of God, for whom nothing is impossible.

How many call her “blessed” today?

⁵⁰ His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him.

This forms a transition from what God has done for Mary to what God does for those who fear Him.

⁵¹ He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. ⁵² He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. ⁵³ The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

God is always faithful to His promises. While it is true that God builds the new of salvation history upon the old promises made to Abraham, membership in the reconstituted Israel is God’s gift which elicits the response of appropriate conduct and is not contingent solely on one’s ethnic heritage as a child of Abraham.

⁵⁶ Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

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