

In Mary, Humanity and Divinity Are at Home

Biblical Reflection for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary

As ZENIT will suspend service Aug. 1-15, we are publishing the Gospel reflection for Aug. 15 in advance of the break.

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JULY 30, 2010 (Zenit.org).- It is not often that the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary falls on a Sunday. I would like to offer a few reflections on the historical and pastoral significance of this important feast, and its relevance for our own life. The Assumption of Mary, Mother of the Lord, into heaven is a consoling sign of our hope. In looking to her, carried up amid the rejoicing of angels, human life is opened to the perspective of eternal happiness. Our own death is not the end but rather the entrance into life that knows no death.

Immaculate Conception

For Catholic Christians, the belief in the Assumption of Mary flows from our belief in and understanding of Mary's Immaculate Conception. We believe that if Mary was preserved from sin by the free gift of God, she would not be bound to experience the consequences of sin and death in the same way that we do. We believe that because of the obedience and fidelity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the end of her earthly life, she was assumed both body and soul into heavenly glory.

History

For several centuries in the early Church, there is no mention by the church fathers of the bodily Assumption of Mary. Irenaeus, Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose and the others Church Fathers said nothing about it. Writing in 377 A.D., church father Epiphanius states that no one knows Mary's end.

As early as the 5th century, the feast of the Assumption of Mary was celebrated in Syria. In the 5th and 6th centuries, the Apocryphal Books were testimony of the unwillingness of the Church to accept the fact that the body of the Mother of God should lie in a grave. In the 6th century, the feast of the Assumption was celebrated in Jerusalem and perhaps even in Alexandria.

The first "genuine" written references to the Assumption come from authors who lived in the sixth to the eighth centuries. It is mentioned in the sermons of St. Andrew of Crete, St. John Damascene, St. Modestus of Jerusalem and others. In the West, St. Gregory of Tours mentions it first. St. Gregory lived in the sixth century, while St. John Damascene belongs to the eighth century.

In the 9th century, the feast of the Assumption was celebrated in Spain. From the 10th to the 12th centuries, there was no dispute over the celebration of the feast in the Western Church. In the 12th century, the feast of was celebrated in the city of Rome and in France.

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From the 13th century to the present, there is certain and undisputed faith in the Assumption of Mary in the universal Church. In 1950, Pope Pius XII taught infallibly ("Munificentissimus Deus"): "Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul to heavenly glory."

Assumption or Dormition?

The Catholic feast of the Assumption is celebrated on Aug. 15, and Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholics celebrate the Dormition of the Theotokos (the falling asleep of the Mother of God) on or around the same date. Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that Mary died a natural death, that her soul was received by Christ upon death, and that her body was resurrected on the third day after her death and that she was taken up into heaven bodily in anticipation of the general resurrection. Her tomb was found empty on the third day. (One can visit the Orthodox tomb of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem. It is located near the Church of All Nations and the Garden of Gethsemane.)

Sign of the Kingdom

In presenting the "great sign" of the "woman clothed with the sun," the first reading from the Book of Revelation (11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10) says that she "was with child and ... cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery" (12:2). Just as the risen Christ who has ascended into heaven forever bears the wounds of his redemptive death within his glorious body, so his Mother brings to eternity "the pangs" and "anguish for delivery" (12:2). We could say that Mary, as the new Eve, continues from generation to generation to give birth to the new man, "created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). This is the Church's eschatological image, which is present and active in the Virgin Mary.

Unless Christ is risen

In the second reading for today's feast (1 Corinthians 15:20-27), St. Paul addresses a problem among the Corinthians: their denial of the resurrection of the dead (12) apparently because of their inability to imagine how any kind of bodily existence could be possible after death (35). Paul affirms both the essential corporeity of the resurrection and its future orientation. His response moves through three steps: a recall of the basic "kerygma" about Jesus' resurrection (15:1-11), an assertion of the logical inconsistencies involved in denial of the resurrection (12-34), and an attempt to perceive theologically what the properties of the resurrected body must be (35-58).

Denial of the resurrection (15:12) involves logical inconsistencies. The basic one, stated twice (15:13, 16), is that if there is no such thing as (bodily) resurrection, then it has not taken place even in Christ's case. The consequences for the Corinthians are grave: both forgiveness of sins and salvation are an illusion, despite their strong convictions about both. Unless Christ is risen, their faith does not save.

Christ's definitive victory over death, which came into the world because of Adam's sin, shines out in Mary, assumed into Heaven at the end of her earthly life. It was Christ, the "new" Adam, who conquered death, offering himself as a sacrifice on Calvary in loving obedience to the Father. In this way he redeemed us from the slavery of sin and evil. In Mary's triumph, the Church contemplates her whom the Father chose as the true Mother of his Only-begotten Son, closely associating her with the saving plan of Redemption.

Life from barren wombs and empty tombs

The Gospel for today's feast (Luke 1:39-56) invites us into the extraordinary story of two women sharing their faith, hope, and happiness as they prepare for motherhood. It is an occasion for celebration between Elizabeth, who is old and barren, and Mary, a young betrothed virgin -- a story of God's ability to both give and sustain

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life. Our God causes life to surge forth from barren wombs and empty tombs. Mary's trip to the hill country of Judah is also a manifestation of the coming kingdom.

Mary is a model for each of us, and her Assumption into heaven reminds us that there is hope for you and me. What happens to the Virgin daughter of Nazareth at the end of her earthly pilgrimage will happen to each of us if we are faithful and obedient as she was.

Taken up into heaven, Mary shows us the way to God, the way to heaven, the way to life. She shows it to her children baptized in Christ and to all people of good will. She opens this way especially to the little ones and to the poor, those who are open to divine mercy. The Queen of the world reveals to individuals and to nations the power of the love of God whose plan upsets that of the proud, pulls down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the humble, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away (Luke 1:51-53).

Marian triptych

We celebrate three great moments of Mary's life knowing that they represent all of our lives. When Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 with the Bull "Ineffabilis," he referred explicitly to the biblical story of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel. The angel Gabriel's salutation, "Hail, full of grace," is understood as recognizing that Mary must always have been free from sin. God was present and moving in Mary's life from the earliest moments. God's grace is greater than sin; it overpowers sin and death. Through her Immaculate Conception, Mary was called for a special mission.

The second moment of Mary's life is the Incarnation. Through the virginal birth of Jesus we are reminded that God moves powerfully in our lives too. Our response to that movement must be one of recognition, gratitude, humility, openness and welcome. Through the Incarnation, Mary was gifted with the Word made Flesh.

The Church celebrates Mary's final journey into the fullness of God's Kingdom with the dogma of the Assumption promulgated by Pius XII in 1950. As with her beginnings, so too, with the end of her life, God fulfilled in her all of the promises that he has given to us. We, too, shall be raised up into heaven as she was. In Mary we have an image of humanity and divinity at home. God is indeed comfortable in our presence and we in God's. Through her Assumption, Mary was chosen to have a special place of honor in the Godhead.

Mary follows our footsteps

Let me conclude these reflections on Mary's Assumption with the moving words of Benedict XVI, spoken at his weekly General Audience at Castel Gandolfo on Aug. 16, 2006.

He said: "By contemplating Mary in heavenly glory, we understand that the earth is not the definitive homeland for us either, and that if we live with our gaze fixed on eternal goods we will one day share in this same glory and the earth will become more beautiful. Consequently, we must not lose our serenity and peace even amid the thousands of daily difficulties. The luminous sign of Our Lady taken up into Heaven shines out even more brightly when sad shadows of suffering and violence seem to loom on the horizon.

"We may be sure of it: from on high, Mary follows our footsteps with gentle concern, dispels the gloom in moments of darkness and distress, reassures us with her motherly hand. Supported by awareness of this, let us continue confidently on our path of Christian commitment wherever Providence may lead us. Let us forge ahead in our lives under Mary's guidance."

[The readings for the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary are Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab; 1 Corinthians 15:20-27; Luke 1:39-56]

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