

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Gospel: Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

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

REFLECTION 1: GOD'S MASTERPIECE

In 1950, when the Church defined the truth of Mary's Assumption, she was not teaching anything new. Catholics always believed that Our Lady with her body and soul was taken into heaven. Tradition tells us that after the sorrowful parting of Mother and Son after Calvary, John the Beloved Disciple took care of Mary and brought her with him to live at Ephesus where John would subsequently become bishop. Tradition also tells us that when Mary had completed her 'earthly span of life' (the word 'death' is never used), she slept and at the place of her repose, a host of the most exquisite flowers bloomed. In fact the Greek Orthodox community have a church in Jerusalem known as the Church of the Dormition (viz: 'The Sleeping').

For centuries the Church has applied to Mary the words of today's reading from the Apocalypse to describe her glorious entrance into heaven: 'Now a great sign appears in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, standing on the moon with twelve stars on her head for a crown'. Since the sixth century this splendid event was commemorated in a solemn way throughout the world. The Assumption of our Blessed Mother is her final victory on earth and the beginning of her glorious reign in heaven. Mary's whole life was a series of victories – the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation and the Divine Motherhood. These were extraordinary gifts and privileges for her, and all of these triumphs pointed to her last victory – the day when her body and soul would be taken into heaven.

In our Gospel today (Luke 1: 39-56) we have the words of the Magnificat. It's the answer to the praise Mary received from her cousin Elizabeth. It reveals the depth of Mary's soul and her faith, her perfect submission to the will of God and the mission entrusted to her. This song known as Mary's Canticle is replete with biblical reminiscences. It speaks of the humble servant of God as the ideal image of the poor (the Ana win), the beloved of God spoken by the inspired composer of the psalms. The Magnificat speaks in lyrical tones of the vision of God and of human beings and their relationship with God as made known in the Gospels. No one has had the same personal experience as Mary and that's why the Church in her evening prayer by narrating this Canticle can see the marvels that the Lord has done for the people of God throughout the ages. What God has done for the least among us arouses feelings of gratitude and joy. All of us are conscious of having been chosen by God, being very special in that

God has acted towards us out of sheer love – and so the Church and all the faithful give thanks for the many graces received. Mary sees herself at the centre of the history of salvation and from now on all ages will call her blessed. ‘Holy is his name’ she cries out and this Great God of ours acts out of compassion for us throughout the ages, acknowledged by all who reverence his name. He raises the lowly ones to high places and satisfies those who hunger for truth and justice.

Mary was raised to the glory of her Son, because she believed the word and accepted it with total availability. Her praise of God is so perfect that the Church never tires of using these words that anticipate for each one of us the hope we cherish of sharing Mary’s company in union with her Son when God calls us.

REFLECTION 2: ASSUMED BODY & SOUL

The Feast of the Assumption tells us that Mary is in heaven, soul as well as body. Being sinless and the Mother of God, her body, like that of her Son Jesus, did not undergo the decay of death. Mary passed from an earthly state to a heavenly one right away. From a practical point of view the Feast of the Assumption reminds us that we too are destined for heaven someday, soul as well as body. Our body in heaven will not be a physical one however, but a spiritual one.

Speaking of the resurrection from the dead and the kind of body we will have after this life, Paul wrote to the people of Corinth and this is what he said. First of all he asks the question: how can the dead be restored to life? What kind of body will they have? (1 Cor 15:36). Then he goes on to answer his own question by comparing the body to a seed in this life that become a plant that grows from the seed in the next. Then he goes on to explain that before that seed becomes a plant it must first die to itself before it is clothed in this new life by God. Our Blessed Mother was exempted from all this transition; ‘having completed the course of her earthly life’ she was taken body and soul to reside for all eternity as Queen of Heaven.

Our Blessed Lady is not in heaven in a passive way simply exulting in the presence of the heavenly court, remote from us struggling mortals on planet earth. Like her Son, Mary is working for us, concerned about us, anxious about us, as we struggle in the cut and thrust of life. She intercedes for us with her Son, ‘when the way is flat and dull, in times of grey endurance, opening up new horizons’. We have only to go to the Grotto at Lourdes to witness those who are sick and suffering where Mary, through her Son, lifts up the lowly.

Pope Pius XII on the 1st November 1950 defined the Assumption of our Lady as a dogma of faith to be held by all the faithful. He expressed it in these words, based on the faith of the people of God from earliest times, rather than from any particular Biblical text, **‘We pronounce, declare and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma, that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul to heavenly glory’**. Let us conclude with this prayer, to our Blessed Mother,

“Take my hand O Blessed Mother, hold me firmly lest I fall; I am nervous when I am walking and to thee I humbly call. Guide me over every crossing, watch me when I am on the stairs, let me know you are beside me, listen to my fervent prayer. Bring me to my destination safely every day. Help me with each undertaking as the hours pass away. And when evening falls upon us, and I fear to be alone, take my hand O Blessed Mother, once again and lead me home”. Amen.