

# The Assumption of Our Lady

By

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Protestants as well as Catholics believe that the Body of Jesus Christ is now in heaven. This doctrine is called the Ascension and is explicitly revealed in the Bible. All Christians believe, too, that the bodies of the just will be united to their souls at the end of the world and be glorified in heaven after the manner of the Risen Body of Christ. This is also revealed explicitly in the New Testament. It follows, therefore, that the bodies and souls of the departed saints are now separated, that their souls are in heaven and their bodies in the grave. Christians of every conceivable denomination are agreed on these two dogmas.

After that, however, Protestants and Catholics part company, for Catholics believe that the body of the Blessed Virgin Mary is also in heaven. We call this doctrine the Assumption. By it we hold that the glorification of the flesh, which will take place for us only at the end of time, was granted to Mary at the end of her earthly life. We believe, therefore, that the bodies of both Jesus and Mary are now in heaven. There is, however, this difference: Jesus arose from the tomb and ascended into heaven by his own power, whereas Mary's body was taken up to heaven by the power of her Son. For that reason we use two different words: the Ascension of Christ and the Assumption of Mary.

## **Historical Data Among others are:**

At no time in history has Christendom venerated a grave or tomb of the Blessed Virgin.

Until the 5th century of Christianity there was not even a legend concerning her place of burial.

There is absolutely no relic of Our Lady's body in existence; nor has any person or city ever claimed possession of such a relic.

"From the earliest ages of the Church the faithful venerated the remains of the Saints, and in instances even strove for the honor of possessing them. Relics of the Apostles and of thousands of martyrs are preserved in richly adorned shrines and caskets. The sacred remains of Mary could not have been lost or neglected; that is a hypothesis which it would be impossible to entertain" (Father Canice, OFM Cap.).

In the first sixteen centuries of Christianity no reputable theologian or school of theology ever questioned the dogma of the Assumption. It is notable how theologians have been more unanimous in accepting the Assumption than the Immaculate Conception.

## **Implicit in Bible**

The Bible nowhere mentions explicitly this glorification of Mary's Immaculate body. That it has been revealed by God is nevertheless certain; otherwise it could not have been defined as a dogma of faith. A public revelation of the Assumption must have been made to the Apostles, or at least to one of them, because public revelation closed with the death of the last Apostle. There are, however, several implicit revelations of the Assumption in the Bible. The most important texts are: Gen. 3:15; Lk. 1:28; Apoc. 12:1-2.

## **Reasons for the Assumption**

Ancient belief in the Assumption was based on the Christian conviction that Christ willed his holy Mother to participate in all his prerogatives. Therefore he associated her in his own glorification by an anticipated resurrection.

The corruption of the grave is a punishment for sin (Gen. 3:19). Our flesh is a "flesh of sin" (Rom. 8:3). Through the desires of this flesh the majority of our sins are committed. In Mary, however, there is not the slightest stain of sin. By her Immaculate Conception and fullness of grace she was entitled to immunity from corruption in her body. The principle of corruption which we bear within us did not exist in her. "Flesh and blood," says the Bible, "cannot possess the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:15). Even the bodies of the saints do not deserve to enter the kingdom of God. They must first be renewed by the hand of God. But Mary's body — Immaculate, pure, sinless — is consequently incorruptible.

From the first moment of her conception the state of the Blessed Virgin Mary was analogous, but superior, to the state of Adam and Eve before the fall. Had they not sinned they would not have heard the divine malediction: "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return" (Gen. 3,19). Doesn't justice therefore demand that Mary be preserved from a malediction never merited by her?

Mary's Immaculate Body was, in a sense, the origin of sanctification of all mankind. Her flesh was used to form the flesh of her Son; the flesh which he used on the Cross to destroy death and sin, and which he gave to us that we might rise from the dead. Was this flesh, Mary's flesh, Christ's flesh, the instrument of our redemption and resurrection, to be subject to the corruption of the grave?

"The womb that bore Jesus Christ, the hands that caressed him, the arms that embraced him, the breasts that nourished him, the heart that so loved him — it is impossible to think that these crumbled into dust" (Father Canice, OFM Cap.).

Christ's perfect victory over Satan included victory over sin and death. But Mary, the Mother of God, was most intimately associated with Jesus in his victory over Satan. She not only furnished the flesh which Christ sacrificed for our Redemption, but she also had a definite role of cooperation in this Redemption. She was associated with him in the different parts of his triumph. Hence she was associated with him in his victory over death by her anticipated resurrection and Assumption. This argument is used by Pope Pius IX in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*.

In the virginal conception and birth of his Son, God performed an absolutely unique miracle. This miracle was an act of divine respect for the flesh of the Mother of God. Against all the laws of nature he preserved the corporal integrity of his Mother. Would he later allow that Immaculate flesh to suffer the immeasurably greater lesion of the corruption of the grave?

It is a basic principle of Catholic teaching that all the prerogatives and glories of Mary are because of Jesus Christ. His divine dignity presupposes and demands such perfection in his Mother. The flesh of Mary was the Flesh of Christ; and Christ owed it to himself to preserve from dissolution the body that had served to form his own Body. Mary's body, like her soul, had to be sinless and undefiled. The humiliation of the Mother would have been the humiliation of the Son.

### **Silence of Early Centuries**

The first person known to have asked what happened to Mary's body was St. Epiphanius. He was a 4th century Bishop, close to the scene of events, who had devoted himself seriously to the study of Mary's death. On the occasion of the controversy against the Antidico-marianites, opponents of Mary's virginity,

he apparently had no knowledge of even the existence of a tradition concerning the end of Mary's life. In fact, he seemed to be of the opinion as are many mariologists today, that Our Lady did not die.

## **Origin of Feast**

From the middle of the 5th century a feast called "Commemoration of the Mother of God" was celebrated on August 15th in a shrine located near Jerusalem. Near the end of the 6th century this became a feast commemorating the end of Mary's sojourn on earth and was called the "Dormition of Our Lady." In the beginning of the 8th century Pope Sergius introduced the feast into Rome together with three other feasts of the Blessed Virgin. From Rome it spread rapidly throughout western Europe. It was Pope Hadrian who, at the end of the 8th century, gave it the name of the "Assumption of St. Mary." The Greek Church became interested in this question long before the Latin Church did. Both Greek and Latin writers, however, readily acknowledged their ignorance of the way in which the Blessed Virgin Mary had left this world.

## **Development and Definition**

When Pope Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, it drew attention to the possibility of a dogmatic definition of the Assumption. Both are truths not found explicitly in the Bible. Many began to petition the Apostolic See for its immediate definition. Between 1849 and 1940 more than 2,500 such petitions were received from bishops and superiors of religious orders. These represented 73% of the Catholic hierarchy. On May 1st, 1946, Pope Pius XII sent an Encyclical Letter ("Deiparae Virginis") to all the bishops of the world asking them to make known to him the belief and devotion of themselves, their clergy, and their people regarding the Assumption. 1185 bishops answered that the dogma could safely be defined, and only 16 questioned the advisability of the proclamation at that time. It was therefore a quasi-unanimity. On November 1st of the Holy Year, 1950, the day after the closing of the 8th International Marian Congress, held that year in Rome, Pius XII solemnly defined the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven. This great event took place in the Piazza of St. Peter's in the presence of 40 Cardinals, 500 bishops, thousands of priests, and close to one million lay persons. The exact words of the dogma of faith definition, extracted from the Bull "Munificentissimus Deus," were:

"Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory."

Just as Mary received Christ on earth, so Christ in turn received Mary in heaven. Having deigned to descend to her, it was fitting that he should raise her to himself in his glory. The place of the Mother of God is in the splendors of eternal glory and not in the gloom of the sepulchre.

"The Virgin, who gave history its impetus, was herself soon detached from it, to become instead an emblem of history's goal." — Jean Guitton •

## **Prayer of Pope Pius XII**

"O Immaculate Virgin, Mother of God and Mother of Men, — we believe with all the fervor of our Faith in your triumphal Assumption, both in body and soul, into heaven where you are acclaimed as Queen of all the choirs of angels and all the legions of the Saints; and we unite with them to praise and bless the Lord Who has exalted you above all other pure creatures, and to offer you the tribute of our devotion and our love." (from the Assumption Prayer of Pope Pius XII)