

THE ASSUMPTION IN TRADITION

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INCE the solemn definition of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1854, devoted children of God's Holy Mother have turned their attention and hopes toward her glorious Assumption. Written records of this tradition, in fact, go as far back as do those of the Immaculate Conception. The Assumption is aged in the consciousness of Catholic tradition, transfixed, as it were, to the hearts of all followers of Christ. So remarkably glorious indeed are its historical records that it might be pictured as a brilliantly illuminated chariot of triumph rolling majestically along the highways of centuries. Only twice was it threatened, but almost instantly innumerable theological and saintly mechanics hurried to the wheels, and the beautiful chariot continued on until our time. The Catholic world today is looking forward to the time when God in His Providence will will that what has been a strong tradition from the beginning will be solemnly defined as a dogma of faith.

Just when the Assumption took place it would be extremely difficult to determine. However, historians have speculated concerning this, and Baronius assigns it to the year 48 A.D. In the early Church, the feast which commemorated this event was entitled *Our Lady's Slumber*,¹ which meant not only her peaceful death but also the brief time that her body was in the tomb. Yet this was not its only signification. No less a witness than St. John Damascene assures us that the glorious transition into Heaven was included in the celebration, just as we now celebrate both of these events on the fifteenth of August and call the feast *The Assumption*.

There are no written records of the tradition which date further back than the middle of the fifth century. The writers of the New Testament made no direct and explicit mention of it, and it is noticeably absent from the works of the ecclesiastical writers of the first four centuries. Some reasoned from this to its denial, but their

¹ *Dormitio Beatæ Mariæ Virginis.*



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arguments presupposed the repudiation of Tradition as a font of revelation. When we consider that both the authors of the New Testament and the Fathers of the early church were preoccupied with polemical work, it should not be disturbing to us that the writers of these centuries did not treat the subject. Furthermore, the Gospels and Epistles were not meant to be a complete synopsis of the Faith, but were written to drive home some of the fundamental truths. Moreover, during the first four centuries the Church was still in the Catacombs—in other words, she was struggling to preserve her life, faith in Jesus Christ. It is, then, no matter for concern that we lack historical records of the tradition dating from this period.

Following the era of silence, the Christian world was flooded with what is now known as apocryphal literature. The Apocrypha, as they are called, are writings which were once considered by many to be canonized works of Holy Scripture, but which have since been discarded. Written in the fourth and fifth centuries, they were ascribed very often to one or another of the Apostles or saints of the apostolic age. In them the first traces of written records of the Assumption are to be found. Though they contain many irrelevant, even fantastic and legendary details, all of the accounts agree on the essential facts, namely, Mary's death, burial, and transition into Heaven. The most widely known of these writings relative to the Assumption is the *Liber Transitus (Assumptionis) Sanctae Mariae Virginis*, which has been falsely attributed to St. Melito of Sardes. Like all of the Apocrypha, so it is thought, this book was based upon the writings of Leucius, whom Pope Galasius (494) referred to as a "disciple of the devil." However, even after the denunciatory decree of the Pope, the *Liber Transitus* enjoyed great popularity.

These apocryphal books must be considered as the source of the tradition of Mary's Assumption or *Dormition*. Their value consists rather in this, that they did transmit to posterity the essential elements of the oral tradition as Christians in that early period believed it. That was their positive contribution, but they also had one great evil effect. So numerous were the imaginative insertions that many writers of succeeding centuries, becoming thoroughly disgusted, fell into the other regrettable extreme and did not so much as mention the Assumption. But the tradition, as has been said, did not depend for its life and vigor upon these apocrypha. This was clearly indicated by Dr. Karl Adam when he wrote: "Even though these truths . . . circulated originally among the faithful in distorted and legendary forms which will not bear historical

criticism, yet the living community grasped their substance and inner value too intimately, vitally and immediately to be able to sacrifice their eternal content along with the imperfect forms and expressions to which the theologians objected."²

Many conjectures have been made with regard to the place, time and manner of this great and crowning mystery in the life of the Mother of God. There are two principal traditions, both of which can be traced in historical records back to the middle of the fifth century. One is the *Jerusalem Tradition*, or as it is sometimes called, *The Euthymian Story*, which was endorsed by Juvinal, Patriarch of the Holy City (418-458), as "an ancient and reliable tradition." In other words, it did not commence with the *Liber Transitus Sanctae Mariae Virginis*, but was the subject of belief for generations before. The more important details of the Jerusalem Tradition are that Saint John cared for Mary after the Resurrection; that she dwelt in the Cenacle; that the Apostles were present at her death; that Jesus came to receive His Mother's soul; that the tomb was vacant when Thomas arrived late and wished to see the precious relic. This has undoubtedly been the more accepted of the two accounts and while we may not assent to all of the details, it would be very dangerous to express or entertain doubts regarding the essential elements of death, burial and transition into Heaven. Popes, Saints and scholars all down the centuries have not hesitated to approve it. In the seventh century Pope Saint Gregory the Great and Saint John Damascene, as well as Saints Modestus, Sopronius, and Germanus, Patriarchs of Jerusalem expressed their approbation.

The *Ephesus Tradition*, which was maintained by the Fathers of the Council of Ephesus (431) in a synodal letter, proposes that city as the place of Mary's death. In point of probability it is incontestable, and many are its adherents today. But we are not concerned here with the relative merits of the two traditions; the important thing to note is that both agree in the three essential elements. Thus was the tradition found in the first historical records, and centuries have not changed it.

When the Church began to breath more fully the air of liberty, and after the Assumption had received some attention from the apocryphal writers, Saints and Scholars also made it a subject for their pens. Saint Modestus in the latter half of the fifth century, followed by Saint Andrew of Crete and Gregory of Tours in the sixth, preached and wrote about it. Saint John Damascene (675-

² Adam, Karl, "Spirit of Catholicism," pg. 135.

748), however, is its Doctor and principal champion. He has written three sermons on the Assumption and these, together with his position with regard to the history of the tradition, merit for him the title of Doctor of the Assumption. He it was who separated the wheat from the chaf and exposed to the clear light of day the essential and non-essential elements of the doctrine. He answered adequately all of the objections that were then raised or have since arisen. He explained the fundamental reasons for the fittingness of such a glorification of Mary, and refuted the now time-worn objection that Mary did not suffer death because she did not partake of the stain of original sin. In his own words, "It was fitting that, having put off the corruptible, she should be clothed with incorruption, since even the Lord of nature did not refuse to experience death."³ And again, "It is fitting that after the flesh had cast off the earthly and darksome weight of mortality in death, like gold in a furnace, it should come forth from the tomb incorrupt and pure, shining with the light of incorruptibility." "Thus," he says, "being the mother of the living God, she is transferred to Him in a worthy manner."⁴ In these words he radicantes the Assumption in the divine maternity, thus giving to the written history of the tradition a definite and lasting mold.

From his time to the present day, there has been missing no link in a continuous chain of illustrious champions. Even before his death, during the reign of Pope Sergius I, it was one of the principal feasts in Rome. In rank it was a double of the first class; it was a holy day of obligation; and the records of the Council of Salzburg (799) show that the feast was celebrated with great solemnity. Pope Leo IV instituted the octave about the year 847, and in 858 Nicolas I said that the Vigil of the Assumption had been the practice of the church—"antiquitus tenet Ecclesia." Opposition then raised its head for the first time, but in the theological disputes which ensued all opponents were overpoweringly defeated. So strong indeed was the reaction that the doctrine was not even hypothetically questioned again until the thirteenth century. Each succeeding century saw its heralds. Saint Peter Damian in the eleventh century and Saints Anselm and Bernard in the twelfth, were especially devoted to the glorified Mother of God.

The illustrious and intellectual thirteenth century did not fail to

³ St. John Damascene, I *Dorm.*, 10 (713D).

⁴ III *Dorm.*, 3 (757 B C).

pay homage to this noble Christian tradition. Saint Albert the Great examined the reasons alleged for the doctrine and pronounced that "it is manifest that the most Blessed Mother of God, body and soul, was assumed above the choirs of angels."⁵ Such a statement from a saint and scholar like Albert of Cologne is, undoubtedly, weighty evidence as to the soundness of the tradition. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Albert's pupil and the recognized prince of theologians, was no less explicit. Speaking of Mary he said: "cum corpore est assumpta in coelum."⁶ Truly, great devotion to the Mother of Christ marked the lives of both of these giants in the theological world, but, because they were the most rational of the rational theologians, their testimony cannot be discounted as mere piety. Rather it must be recognized as deliberate assent to what their Christian sensibilities told them was correct. Nor was devotion to this jewel in Mary's crown confined to two theologians of this century. It was common to learned and unlearned. Processions of splendor distinguished the celebration among the people, and the feast was one of the liturgical glories of the universities, especially of that of Paris. Hardly could a defined doctrine of the Church have been more universally accepted.

In some places the magnificent processions did come to an end, but they were resumed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the doctrine was attacked by the reformers. In that crisis the theologians and preachers of the newly founded Society of Jesus championed the doctrine. The reformers raised again the objections that had been refuted by Saint John Damascene a thousand years before, but their opposition served only to strengthen the tradition in the hearts and minds of the faithful. The Assumption suffered one more swiftly passing wave of opposition in the Jansenistic movement. Pope Pius IX in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* defined the Immaculate Conception, until then traditional doctrine which had proceeded in history simultaneously with the tradition of the Assumption. The latter in point of fact appears to have been more tenaciously adhered to in some centuries than the former.

Since 1854, the Catholic world has been looking forward to the solemn definition of the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven. Over two hundred Bishops and theologians have petitioned for this because, they maintain, it is without doubt a divine-apostolic

⁵ *Opera Omnia* (Lyons, 1651), XX, pp. 87 ff.

⁶ Saint Thomas's *Commentary on the Hail Mary*.

tradition. The Feast is universally celebrated with great splendor, and devoted children of Mary should pray earnestly that it will be defined soon.

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DESIRE

CAMILLUS LILLIE, O.P.

Flame of my heart, two-tongued, but one,
 That sheds across dark path of life
 Both light and shadows:

O quivering Tongue, so aspen-like
 In softest breeze; like mortal frame
 When death is near:

Your every breath is warm and sweet;
 Yet embered fount, red coal, turns pale
 When left unstirred:

Your life on tears, salt-oil, depends,
 On them grows bright, climbs high; yet dies
 When fed with smiles.

O strange Desire! How can you live
 Adverse to all, and quaintly feed
 On contradictions?