

A MOTHER IN HEAVEN FOR US

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FROM June 18 to June 22 the Archbishop of Ottawa held a Marian Congress as a national thanksgiving to the Mother of God for the blessings bestowed upon Canada, and to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of his diocese. Led by nine Cardinals and more than a hundred bishops and archbishops from five continents of the earth, a huge crowd of two hundred thousand pilgrims gathered in the capital city of Canada, swelling its population to twice its normal size. On the last two days whole parishes with drums and bands, schools and religious societies came to the Congress in 150 special trains to take part in the ceremonies, which reached their climax on the last day, when the Act of Consecration of Canada to The Immaculate Heart of Mary was read in French and English by two members of the national Government. The message of the Congress was: intercession with the Mother of God to obtain from her Divine Son a lasting world peace. And the vast concourse of faithful present, representing every rank in the Church, bowed their heads in humble, trusting prayer to Mary—a stirring testimony to the age-long devotion of Catholics to the Maid of Nazareth.

VENERATION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

This veneration of Mary, coupled with simple faith in her intercessory power with God, has been found in Catholic piety since the early days of the Church. It has never been wholly absent, and has characterized some periods of the history of the Church with its fervor and widespread popularity, particularly those times when heresy threatened to destroy the seamless robe of Catholic doctrine. This should cause us no wonder if we remember what the Church says of the Blessed Mother in the Liturgy: "Thou alone hast destroyed the heresies of all the world." "Mary the Mother of Jesus" is a perpetual challenge to the apostasy of individuals and nations. She is the 'Woman' of the Divine Promise, who, in crushing the serpent beneath her heel, continually crushes the serpent's brood. Though "beautiful . . . sweet and comely as Jerusalem," the Virgin Mother of God is "ter-

rible as an army set in array" to all who fight against her Divine Son.¹

The Divine Motherhood of Mary is not only the source of her power; it is also the reason for her exalted dignity and singular fullness of grace. All her privileges, sanctity, and power were conferred on her by God so that she might be, as St. Thomas says, *Mater idonea*, a worthy Mother of His Son. None but the purest and fairest of all God's creatures would be fit for so sublime a position. No flesh tainted with the least stain of sin could fashion the body in which the Saviour was to suffer and die to redeem mankind. So, Mary was conceived immaculate and received the special privileges of personal freedom from sin and perpetual virginity. And it has been the constant teaching of the Church that after her death Our Blessed Lady was assumed body and soul into heaven.

HER HOLY DEATH

Nothing certain is known about either the time or place of the Blessed Mother's death. The dates given for it vary between three and fifteen years after Christ's Ascension, and two cities—Jerusalem and Ephesus—claim to be the place of her departure from this life. Common consent favours Jerusalem, where her alleged tomb is shown; but early in this century new arguments were brought forward in favor of Ephesus. This lack of historical evidence has led some theologians to teach that Our Lady did not die. But all the Fathers of the Church, except St. Epiphanius, and most theologians hold the opposite opinion. The Church, too, in her prayers for the feast of the Assumption, speaks of Our Lady who "today underwent the death of the body," and "whom we know to have passed out of this life to satisfy the condition of our mortality."²

The death of Mary, however, was not presaged or accompanied by any of the circumstances which are usually associated with death. There was no "faltering breath" or "chill of heart," no "strange innermost abandonment," no "emptying out of each constituent" such as Gerontius experienced in Cardinal Newman's great poem, "The Dream of Gerontius." Such signs of human weakness are not in keeping with the natural perfection with which she was so richly endowed by God. St. Thomas insists that "it was not becoming that Christ should assume all the defects of human nature," such as ignorance or disease, but those only which are common to all men, such as death,

¹ Cantic. of Cantic., VI, 3.

² From the Collect and Secret of the Mass of the Assumption.

hunger, and thirst.³ Furthermore, the great theologian Cardinal Cajetan teaches that "it is to be believed that the Blessed Virgin resembled her Son as far as it was possible." We may say, therefore, that Mary did not experience any weakening or failure of either her mental or bodily powers, that she showed no sign of decrepitude in the closing years of her life. Like her Divine Son, Our Blessed Lady willed to die, and, as St. Albert the Great says: "It is believed that the Blessed Virgin died of love and so without anguish."⁴

TAKEN UP INTO HEAVEN

History is also silent regarding what happened to Mary's body after her death. Some of the Fathers, however, have recorded for us the belief of the early Christians. St. John Damascene thus formulates the tradition of the church of Jerusalem:

"St. Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, at the Council of Chalcedon (451), made known to the Emperor Marcian and Pulcheria, who wished to possess the body of the Mother of God, that Mary died in the presence of all the Apostles, but that her tomb, when opened upon the request of St. Thomas, was found empty; whence the Apostles concluded that the body was taken up to heaven."⁵

St. Gregory of Tours, who lived during the sixth century, says that not only were the Apostles present at the death of the Blessed Mother, but they saw her body taken up into heaven:

"The next morning the Apostles took up her body on the bed and placed it in a tomb, and they kept watch over it, waiting for the coming of the Lord. And behold, the Lord stood before them once more and ordered that the holy body be taken up and borne on a cloud into heaven."⁶

CATHOLIC BELIEF IN THE ASSUMPTION

Though these early traditions may disagree in details, they all agree on the central fact, that both the body and soul of Our Lady were assumed into heaven after her death, and this has been the unshaken belief of Catholics down through the ages. They have always regarded the Assumption as a fitting reward of her unsurpassed sanctity and her co-operation in the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption, as the crown placed upon her Divine Maternity by Almighty God, Who had created her The Immaculate. Thus, she entered

³ *Summa Theologica*, III, 14, 4.

⁴ Mariale, Q. clii.

⁵ Migne, P. G. I, 96.

⁶ De gloria beatorum martyrum, C. IV. P. L., LXXI, 708.

this world free from all taint of sin. Gifts of personal freedom from sin and perpetual virginity kept her body and soul pure during her whole life on earth. It seems most fitting, then, that, when that holy life came to a close, God should have saved her immaculate flesh from the corruption of the tomb by assuming her body and soul into heaven.

The reason is that, although all human flesh is condemned to return to the dust from which it came, God has been pleased to preserve the bodies of some of His saints from corruption as a testimony to their purity and holiness of life, and as an incentive to the faithful to give them the honour that is their due. None, however, reached the summit of perfection that was Mary's. None had the fullness of grace that she had. "The extraordinary graces she received," says Pere Sertillanges, "found in her immaculate body a perfect instrument. Her flesh is inseparable from the Sacred Flesh from which the Blood that is the source of eternal life was shed. Is not this sufficient reason to assure her a special favour?"⁷ We can think of no favour more in harmony with the ineffable sanctity and perfection of the Mother of God than that the Word of God, Who had first bestowed immortal life on the body that was naturally united to Him, should bestow the same privilege upon the Mother from whom He had received that body, immediately after her death.

While the Assumption is a special favour conferred upon Our Lady by Almighty God, still it appeals to us further as something that her position and dignity as the Mother of God almost demanded. She is so absolutely apart from, and immeasurably superior to, all other creatures by reason of her Divine Maternity, that she has a kind of infinite dignity:

The Humanity of Christ, because it is united to God; the created beatitude (of heaven), because it is the enjoyment of God; and the Blessed Virgin, because she is the Mother of God, have a kind of infinite dignity from the infinite goodness that is God, and from this point of view there can be nothing more perfect than they, since there is nothing more perfect than God."⁸

In the strictest sense of the term she is unique, "our fallen nature's solitary boast." Raised above all creatures, even the choirs of angels in heaven, she alone touches the borderland of the divinity.⁹ In view

⁷ *Mois de Marie*. Par Pere Sertillanges, O.P. p. 119.

⁸ S. Thomas, S. T. I, 25, 6 ad 4.

⁹ "Only the Blessed Mary reached the borderland of the divinity by her own natural activity, in so far as she conceived God, bore Him in her womb, gave Him birth, and fed Him with her milk." Cajetan. Comment. in S. T. II-II, 103, 4 ad 2.

of this we cannot think that God's justice would allow the Mother of His Son to wait, as we must wait, for the day of general judgment to receive the full glory of heaven. Her nearness to the confines of the divinity, her sublime dignity would almost demand that she be assumed body and soul into heaven immediately after her death.

IN HEAVEN FOR US

Being Mother of Jesus Christ, True God and True Man, involved being our Mother too. When Mary consented to become the Mother of God, she did so in the name of the whole human race, and was endowed, therefore, with a fullness of grace which not only made her a worthy Mother of God, but also prepared her for her position as Mother of mankind. In his commentary on the *Ave Maria*, St. Thomas tells us what this fullness implied:

"The grace given to Mary was so abundant that it overflowed upon the whole human race. It is a marvellous thing that any saint should receive grace sufficient for the salvation of many souls; but that anyone should be endowed with grace sufficient for the salvation of all mankind, is the most amazing of wonders. Yet this is the privilege of Christ and also of the Blessed Virgin. For we may obtain salvation through this glorious Virgin no matter what the danger may be. . . . Further, we may have her assistance in the performance of every virtuous action, since the words of Ecclesiasticus are applied to her:

In me is all hope of life and of virtue (xxiv, 25)."

From the moment she said *Fiat*, each child of Adam became the child of Mary for whom she must pray and intercede with God, until each attains that degree of Christlike perfection which alone will fit the children of men for the kingdom of God. Every aspiration, desire and act of her whole life was directed to the attainment of this object. But it was only in heaven that her power, intercession, and meditation could become fully effective. Now that she sits in her full glory by the side of her Divine Son in heaven, she is blessed with a vision of Almighty God more perfect than that given to any other creature, and in this vision she can see the most intimate needs of her every child. Therefore she was assumed into heaven, that her power of intercession might have full scope, might be as extensive as the kingdom of God within souls, and be as far-reaching as the redemptive power of her Son, Jesus Christ.

Today the belief in the bodily Assumption of Mary is universal in the East and in the West. According to Pope Benedict XIV it is a probable opinion, to deny which would be impious and blasphemous. The news, that during the past few years petitions have been sent

from all over the world to Our Holy Father, Pope Pius, asking him to define the doctrine of The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin as a dogma of faith, should gladden the hearts of all true children of Mary. Not that such a definition would make the fact of her Assumption any truer. But it should recall to the minds of Catholics the world over that they have a most powerful advocate in heaven to plead their cause before the throne of Almighty God. And surely our weary world was never more in need of her intercession than it is today.