

THE ASSUMPTION AND OUR SANCTIFICATION

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THE ORDINARY PERSON, who has taken no part in such a momentous act as the defining of the Assumption of Our Lady (save for the oblation of his unbounded faith in that holy fact) will look upon the definition with great awe and humble submission, but he may wonder what it means to him. Certainly it means an increase of devotion to Mary. Any official act on the part of the Church which calls attention to her matchless privileges will lead to devotion, but under what aspect? The Assumption, just because it is for Mary a term, a consummation, a fulfillment in glory, may seem very far off to us and not nearly as meaningful as the mysteries of her life on earth. And being so far off, it might be thought to apply entirely to Mary and not at all to us. Thus, when we say our Rosary and complete the cycle of mysteries with the consideration of Mary's Assumption and Coronation, we may tend to think of these mysteries as ornamental and purely adventitious. It would be a great mistake to think so.

For the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady into heaven is related to our salvation and our sanctification in a very special way. John of Euboea writes: "This (the Assumption) is called both a great and final feast because it is the completion of the benign economy of our Lord and God."¹ Note what is said here. First of all, the Assumption is intrinsically related to "the benign economy of our Lord and God," and secondly, it is the "great and final feast" which brings that economy to completion. This striking, and yet doctrinally precise, statement ought to assure us that we will find in Mary's Assumption something more than a mere pious tradition. We will find in it the hidden treasure of sanctification, the instrument and model of our own sanctification. For if Christ so perfectly united her to Himself in the work of Redemption that the Assumption of her body—that body which bore Him, nourished Him, and suffered with Him—brings that work to completion, we must go to the Assumption as to a great and sanctifying mystery, and a mystery so ordained, so

¹ John of Euboea, *Or. in concept. s. Deip.*, no. 22; PG, XCVI, 1497.

located, that it is at the same time a mystery of Mary and a mystery of Christ. For just as the suffering body of the Mother of Sorrows is, together with the suffering humanity of Christ, the instrument and model of our Redemption, so the Assumed Mary, the Glorified Mary, is, together with the Resurrected Christ, the model and instrument of our sanctification and glorification. *As instrument*, that glorified body is the very principle, under Christ, of our salvation. *As model*, it has the power to arouse in us the fullest response of those virtues which in this life are sanctity.

Viewed then as a mark of the special predilection of the Trinity in her regard, and as the exclusive reward of the Redeemer for her part in the work of Redemption, the Assumption of Mary has a unique power to awaken in us an increase of faith, of hope, and charity. And when we consider, as we will, the very concrete and practical lessons it contains for the instruction of our erring generation, we will find in it the most telling motives for the practice of the moral virtues.

FAITH AND HOPE

What choicer food could faith feed upon than the firm belief that the Resurrection, which means perfection of glory in body and soul, is not only accomplished in Christ, but in one of the members of His Mystical Body? For Mary, the principal member of the Mystical Body of Christ, gives testimony to all the members of that Body. She speaks in glory to our faith. "He is not here; He is risen. Behold His Body, victorious over death. Behold my body, now assumed into Heaven. Behold in me your own Resurrection, by the power of my Son." Her conquest over Satan, foretold in Genesis, has been made as perfect as His, for she has been united to Him in glory in an anticipated resurrection which is the type and promise of ours.

That which is our faith is also our hope. If our hope be for grace and glory, it is a hope already fulfilled in Mary. Full of grace, she has attained the fulness of glory by her glorious Assumption into Heaven. Scheeben, the great German theologian, writes in his *Mariology*:

"... Without Mary's resurrection and glorification . . . the guarantee for our redemption would . . . be lacking precisely where, apart from Christ, the evidence of the efficacy of redemption should be most sought and expected." And again: "It could be said that, as Christ's resurrection . . . forms the material and

formal foundation of Christian faith and hope, so Mary's resurrection, which is guaranteed with and by that of Christ . . . is next to Christ the climax of faith in the objectively accomplished work of redemption and forms a secondary guaranty of Christian hope."² Before the risen and glorified Mary faith has a new moment of adhesion, and hope a new pledge and certitude. For in a secondary and subordinate sense we may say of the glorified Mary what St. Paul says of Christ in His Resurrection: "And if Christ be not risen again, then is our preaching vain; and your faith is also vain." (I Cor. 15/17).

CHARITY

When faith has penetrated more deeply the mystery of the Assumption, the Love which instituted and accomplished this holy design is then seen in all its purity. And Love evokes in us a response of love, love for Christ who honored her and us in her glorious Assumption. Indeed, if it is the example of virtue that leads us to virtue, we may say that the granting of this privilege to Mary is an example of the highest virtue on the part of Christ. For His Love could not satisfy itself until she shared with Him that glory of body and soul which was already His by the Resurrection. The Love that speaks in the Assumption is a Love that is entirely efficacious, for it is able to do what poor human love tries in vain to do—to elevate, to sanctify, to glorify the beloved.

Yet it is only in the perfection of a child-like love for Mary that we can make an adequate return of love and thanksgiving to Him for the plenitude of His Love towards her. For it is only then that we will begin to understand that she alone, the Immaculate one, is worthy of His Love, and that the exchange of affection between them is utterly unique. "One is my dove; my perfect one is but one." (Cant. 6, 8). Nor does our return of love find in their Love any source of envy or bitterness. The Liturgy marks out the discipline of our love when it so beautifully adapts these words of Wisdom 7, 12-13 to the Immaculate Mary. "And I rejoiced in all these: for this wisdom went before me, and I knew not that she was the mother of them all. Which I have learned without guile, and communicate without envy, and her riches I hide not." In this generous response to the

² Scheeben, M. J., *Mariology*, Herder, St. Louis, Mo., 1947, pp. 167, 181.

vision of their unique love we will make a perfect return of love to Christ Who honored her and us in the Assumption, and Whose Redemptive mission is marvelously accomplished under the symbol of the two empty tombs.

THE MORAL VIRTUES

Thus does the Assumption of Mary sow in us seeds of sanctification by appearing to us as a motive for all the theological virtues. But it is no less impressive to find in her Assumption the model and type of the moral virtues, and thus to see in the formal definition the special marks of the Divine solicitude for our erring generation. For it is still the moral virtues which, day by day, rule the conduct of men. Indeed, in our times, in the absence of the atmosphere of faith and submission to God, these virtues are called upon to carry special burdens of governance and discipline and control. They may even be called upon to answer to history for the conduct of a generation which found it so hard to be strong, and chaste, and wise, and which strayed so far from the ways of justice.

The relation of the Assumption to the moral virtues may be expressed quite succinctly by saying that the symbol of moral life in our times can and ought to be the glorified body of the Mother of God. It is no irreverence to claim that this body—pure, incorrupt, radiant with glory—stands as a living judgment upon the degrading cult of the female body which is the most striking moral phenomenon of our century. This cult, so widespread as to be accepted without question, and so graced with the photographic skills as to be artistically valid, has no real enemy save the Virgin Mother. In this she is the Mother of Temperance and the Mother of Chastity. For that holy virtue is rooted in the body, curbing at their source the excesses of bodily appetites. But this very body, in Mary, has triumphed over all that is carnal and disordered. In the words of the *Ineffabilis Deus* she is: “. . . innocent, even most innocent, spotless, even entirely spotless . . . all pure, all perfect, the very model of purity and innocence, . . . alone holy and most pure in soul and body. . . .” How can we look upon that most pure body, now glorified in heaven, and not be moved to resist the false claims of the flesh? And when we reflect that the glorification of that body is simply the crown and reward of its virginal purity during life—then does the Assumption appear before men as the great witness to Christian purity. For it cries out to

even the most cultured adherents of sensual beauty: what boasts, what promises can you make in the presence of her who is "more beautiful than beauty, more lovely than loveliness"?

What has been said about Temperance with respect to the Assumption is true also of Fortitude. That noble virtue, like Temperance, is rooted in the bodily appetites and thus shares in the bodily glorification of Mary. We might also add that human courage will find in the Assumed Mary its greatest champion and ally. This is of immense importance in our own day when Christians are disturbed by a genuine fear as they behold the danger to all things Christian, and to life itself, by the attempted rise of an anti-Christian world society. The fortitude to overcome this fear is scarcely to be found in the uncertain promises of men who seem unable even to comprehend the object of that fear. But it is to be found in the "valiant woman" for whom "love was stronger than death," strong enough, indeed, to overcome death. In the Apocalypse this woman is presented to us in all the trappings of strength and power. She is "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars." She is "terrible as an army set in array." Christian courage is immensely fortified when it has before it the vision of this "valiant woman" who has already conquered the beast and who awaits the moment of God's good pleasure in order to conquer him for her children. Indeed we are at the very heart of the Christian dispensation when we confront the mystery which contains the triumph of the humble maid and her tender child over the fierce dragon. "He hath put down the mighty from their seat; he hath exalted the humble." In days when proud and powerful men rule the world we may think we look in vain for the consoling triumph of the Magnificat. But we do not look in vain. The glorified body of Mary is the seal of that triumph. She is the model of all courage which is properly Christian and which is directed toward that conquest which is in a unique way her conquest—the conquest over Satan, sin and death.

We may also see in the Assumption a perfect mirror of Divine Justice, and thus find ourselves strengthened in that virtue which is the foundation of national and international life. For when God delivered Mary from corruption and united her, body and soul, to her Divine Son, he was merely rendering to her a debt of justice. The great privileges he had conferred upon her—her spotless Virginity, her sinlessness, her unique rôle in

the conquest over Satan, and, above all, that unutterable fact which is the root of all these privileges, the divine Maternity—all of these cry out to God for a reward in accordance with her state. That reward is incorruption, assumption, glorification. True, this is a justice which is entirely from God, since her privileges were established in the first place only by divine predilection. But once we grant the existence of these privileges we can find a certain incongruity, a certain defect of justice, in the thought of the sinless Virgin Mother being consigned to dust and awaiting the general Resurrection. If life without justice is insupportable for the least of men, it is unthinkable that God's justice should fail in her regard. It does not fail. It is rendered even to her body, which was His temple and His home. And because, as we have seen, the glory of that body shines through to us laboring in the darkness of faith, all of human nature is honored by redundancy. There can be no contempt toward a nature already so honored; no cruelty, no irreverence. Whatever totalitarian violence or the euphemisms of liberal decadence may do to the bodies of men, they do these things no longer to the unsanctified bodies of pagans. There is a body like these which is already filled with the glory of God. It is the body of Mary. If this body is itself a mirror of Divine Justice, it also brings down justice upon all, and upon that nature which, earthly though it may be, is already glorified in her.

GOD'S CHOSEN INSTRUMENT

Not only does the Assumption of Mary awaken in us stirrings of Faith, and Hope and Love, not only does it bring to the moral virtues new firmness and increase of vision, but the Assumption stands in itself as a very special symbol of the nature of Mary and her great mission. By her mission I mean her role, together with Christ and dependently on him, as the chosen instrument of our salvation. Whatever motives for virtue and holiness of life we may have found in Mary and her Assumption, none will be as inspiring as the simple fact that, with Christ and under Christ, she causes salvation, that, with Him and under Him, she makes us holy. The exemplar of sanctification is also a principle of sanctification, a true cause operating saving effects under a great charter of divine beneficence in which she is an instrument of power and mercy. And not only is she an instrument by reason of her desires and her prayers and the conjunction of her will with Christ. She is an instrument in her very

body. By reason of her glorious Assumption we are able to look to her as to an utterly perfect instrument which offers itself to God, body and soul, in the continuing work of salvation and sanctification.

As to Christ, there can be no doubting the power of His body as an instrument of saving grace. From the moment He is conceived in the womb of Mary He begins in His bodily members the work of salvation. In His earthly life He eats, He sleeps, He teaches, heals, walks among men, and thus earns grace for us in His very body. "And all the multitude sought to touch him: for virtue went out from him and healed all." (Luke 6, 19) Through the surpassing liturgy of an Incarnate life there flowed divine power. Indeed, the crowning work of that Redemptive life was the offering of that body to the fulness of suffering contained in the Passion. All that divine justice permitted, all that sin demanded, all that the great charity of Christ asked for—was paid, and paid in full, with the blood of His heart and the pain of His members. Perfect merit, perfect satisfaction, perfect sacrifice, perfect Redemption are achieved by this broken body of Christ, the spotless instrument of Redemption.

Nor should we forget the rôle that the body of Christ plays in applying the merits of Redemption to men as yet unredeemed and unsanctified. As He suffered for us in His body, so does He eternally present that same body to His Father in intercession for us. The Venerable Bede tells us that the resurrected and glorified Christ still bears the scars and stigmata of His Passion, "that when He pleads for us with the Father He may always show the manner of death He endured for us." And St. Thomas, in assigning the reasons why Christ's Ascension is the cause of our salvation, takes account of this perpetual activity of Christ, the Eternal High Priest, in presenting that sacred body to the Father as the irresistible pledge of our Redemption. "The very showing of Himself in the human nature which He took with Him to heaven is a pleading for us." (III, Q. 57, a. 6)

But if Redemptive power was earned for us and now flows to us through that sacred body of Christ, what are we to say of the holy body of Mary who is co-principle of salvation? All that she is and all that she does in God's Redemptive plan is founded upon the unutterable truth that she is the Mother of God. And she is the Mother of God because she bore in her body the Son of God. He is flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone. Not only did she accept her rôle in the work of Redemption by her maternal fiat,

but in accepting it she offered her very body as the temple of Redemption. The beautiful Office for the Assumption calls this to our minds several times by repeating the words of Ecclus. 24/12: "Then the Creator of all things commanded and said to me; and he that made me rested in my tabernacle."

This fiat of Mary touches not only the person of the Son of God, not only the bringing forth of that Son in a temporal generation, but it extends to all that He was to do in the work of salvation. She is the mother of the Redeemer as such. The prophecy of Simeon must not be judged to be a false note in the Infancy Gospel, entering in harshly to jar the bliss of a young mother. As Christ was ever the Redeemer, she was ever the Mother of the Redeemer, that is to say, the Mother of Sorrows. The body that bore Him was to suffer with Him on Calvary. And for Mary, Compassion was not mere sympathy, however maternal and solicitous. It was "to suffer with" Christ; it was to suffer with and redeem with. Can we doubt that her rôle as Mother of Sorrows and Co-redemptrix involved bodily suffering?

And can we doubt further that her body, now glorified in the Assumption, carries on the work of Redemption, as does the body of Christ, by "pleading for us with the Father"? Indeed it is the Assumption which insures the completion and perfection of her rôle as bodily instrument and which makes possible that secret and blessed mission of hers which we try to describe by calling her Mediatrix, Distributrix, Mother of Grace, Mother of Mercy. That God should so honor that body as to make it the perpetual channel of grace for men should not surprise her children. This is the body which bore His Son, which suffered with that Son in His great suffering, which was crowned with a perpetual and most fruitful virginity, and which was the root and subject of the noblest virtues. She has but to show that body to the Father in order to call down grace upon her children.

In this way the continuing Mediation of Mary is seen as dependent in a very true sense on the Assumption of Mary. For this glorified body of Mary is, with the glorified body of Christ, irresistible. Through it shine forth those queenly virtues which ravish the heart of the king and call forth in behalf of her children the divine good-pleasure.

"The queen stood on thy right hand, in gilded clothing, surrounded with variety. . . . And the king shall greatly desire thy beauty. . . . After her virgins shall be brought to the king. . . . Instead of thy fathers, sons are born to thee . . ." (Ps. 44, *passim*).

CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt then that both the Assumption and the formal definition thereof bear a providential relation to the salvation and the sanctification of souls, and to the great purposes of the Holy Year, the year of the great pardon and the great return. Within a hundred years the Church has set forth the two termini, the Alpha and Omega, of Marian devotion, her Immaculate Conception and her glorious Assumption, as though to establish Mary once and for all, together with her Divine Son, as the beginning and end of all Christian life. For it is nothing less than the renewal of Christian life which is at stake here. And just as the beginning of all Christian life, detestation of sin, is supereminently contained in the example of Mary's utter sinlessness, so the term and consummation of Christian life, which is eternal glory, is perfectly contained and foreseen in her Assumption. In the consideration of these two great mysteries the soul finds rest and great consolation, having before its eyes the full cycle of Redemptive life as it is begun, made perfect and completed in Mary.

For the Church has never intended that her great dogmas be the private possession of theologians and scholars. She has intended that they be food for the Christian soul. They nourish moral life, Christian life, and Christian life in turn purifies the soul and prepares it to accept and penetrate these dogmas. But never is dogma extrinsic to Christian life. Dogma is the story of a life anterior to moral life and above moral life. But this only means that moral life depends upon that life which is before it and above it, the life of the Triune God, the life of Christ and His Sacraments, and the life of Mary. Moral life depends on God, and Christ, and Mary. Therefore the renewal of Christian life which the Pope pleads for and prays for will be accomplished only when God is better known and loved, when Christ and Mary are better known and loved.

This means that those for whom the notion of the Assumption is meaningless or even scandalous have forfeited their right to growth in Christian life. While those who accept that dogma and its definition, and who seek to find in it secret treasures of sanctification, are already sanctified in that effort. And all of us, in the measure of our love for the dogma, will advance from grace to grace, and from virtue to virtue, as we find gradually revealed to our poor human minds the marvelous virtualities hidden in the bodily life of Christ and Mary.