

MARY'S NEWEST SPLENDOR

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THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY has always been a fascinating doctrine. Theologians have long been in agreement as to the fittingness of Mary's final privilege, as a worthy consequence of her Divine Maternity and Immaculate Conception. The Church has from the early centuries of her existence given approbation to this doctrine by proposing it positively in the liturgy and in preaching, a manifestation that she considered it a certain truth taught by her ordinary magisterium. During the Vatican Council in 1870, the Holy Father was petitioned to define the doctrine of the Assumption, but it was to be our privilege in this Holy Year of 1950 to witness so momentous an event. As a result of this definition, the dogma of the Assumption of Mary into heaven is now an article of faith to be believed without question on the authority of the infallible Church of Jesus Christ.

In her very departure from this life, the Blessed Mother of God is brought even closer to us. It seems certain that Mary died. True, some writers have denied it—"without any foundation" as Fr. Hugon, O.P., asserts.¹ The recent definition of the dogma of the Assumption does not touch the question, but it is safe to say that the majority of Catholic writers have held that death did come to our Lady, not as a punishment for sin but rather as a consequence of human nature. It must be remembered that in the state of original innocence Adam was immortal, not by his own nature as a human being, but through a special privilege granted him by God. Human nature, of itself, is susceptible to death, and Mary, though entirely preserved from any sin from the first moment of her conception, was no exception. If Jesus, the Incarnate Word, willed to suffer and die for our salvation, shall we hesitate to say that His Blessed Mother accepted the bonds of death with supreme joy? In the words of an eminent theologian: "Jesus, however, mastered death by accepting it for our salvation. Mary united herself to Him in His death, making for us the sacrifice of His life in the most gen-

¹ Hugon, *Tractatus Dogmatici*, II, 769.

erous martyrdom of heart the world has ever known after that of Our Saviour. And when, later on, the hour of her own death arrived, the sacrifice of her life had already been made. It remained but to renew it in that most perfect form which tradition speaks of as the death of love, a death, that is to say, in which the soul dies not simply in grace or in God's love, but *of* a calm and supremely strong love which draws the soul, now ripe for heaven, away from the body to be united to God in immediate and eternal vision."²

As we have seen, prior to the recent definition of the dogma of the Assumption, the principal arguments in favor of the doctrine were the oral tradition expressed in the liturgy of the universal Church and the teaching of the Doctors. Although no actual mention of the Assumption is found in Sacred Scripture and primitive documents are lacking in any explicit testimony, we find that as early as the 7th century the entire Church, both East and West, celebrated this feast under the title of the "Dormition" (sleeping) of our Lady.³ Many theologians and liturgists declare that a solemn procession was held on that day even before the time of St. Gregory the Great. There are in existence ancient missals which contain majestic prayers in honor of the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. Truly is it said that the faith of the Church is manifested in her prayer: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*.

In addition to the testimony of tradition, however, there are several theological arguments which have always been invoked with regard to Mary's Assumption. The first of these is founded upon her fulness of grace and the exceptional way in which she was blessed by God among women. Mary was so blessed that she was spared the malediction leveled against the rest of her sex to bring forth children in pain and to return to dust."⁴ Her body would not disintegrate, but would be granted an anticipated resurrection from the tomb, as was but fitting for that virginal body which had once held Him Whom the whole world cannot contain. Another argument finds its basis in Mary's association with Jesus in His perfect victory over Satan, a victory which conquered both death and sin. She who truly shared His triumph would also share in its spoils: victory over sin and over death,

² Garrigou-Lagrange, R. M., O.P., *The Mother of the Saviour*. Transl. by B. J. Kelly, C.S.Sp. (Herder, St. Louis, 1949.) p. 156.

³ Hugon, *op. cit.*, p. 770.

⁴ Cf. Genesis 3: 16-19.

sin's consequence. The Collect of the Mass of the Assumption says it perfectly: "She died; but she was not retained captive by the bonds of death."

Theologians have presented also many arguments of convenience, reasons why it would seem only proper that Our Lady should have been taken up body and soul into heaven to be forever enthroned above the angels and saints. They call upon, for example, the love of Jesus for His Most Blessed Mother as a testimony that He would not have permitted her body to corrupt. They invoke, too, the excellent virginity of Mary and her Immaculate Conception, which would demand that her sinless flesh be preserved from the consequence of sin. Some even offer the fact that there are no relics of the Blessed Virgin as a probable indication of her bodily Assumption into heaven.

Arguments such as these were intended only to prove that the doctrine of the Assumption was capable of definition as an article of faith, and they have served their purpose well. Now that our Holy Father has defined the dogma of Mary's Assumption, however, the traditional theological arguments become as the flickering flames of candles before the penetrating beam of a giant search-light. What was previously only a theological conclusion has become an infallibly certain tenet of Christian Doctrine. Reasons of convenience and fittingness now give way to the authority of Truth Itself. Far from being considered another burden added to a long list of dogmas, the definition of the Assumption of Our Lady crowns our faith and renews our hope. Mary has been taken bodily to heaven and our grateful hearts long to join her there. Her Son has raised her up on high, but not beyond our reach.

We said at the outset that the doctrine of the Assumption is fascinating. This is true not only with regard to the theological treasures so intimately connected with the defined dogma itself, but also with regard to the traditional historical details of Mary's death, burial, and Assumption. These latter are, of course, not an article of faith, but have at least a reasonable historical authenticity. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin has been defined infallibly; the circumstances and details concerning that event have not, but ancient writers have left us enough descriptions of them to enkindle our devotion still more.

St. John Damascene is known above all as the Doctor of the Assumption. This eloquent preacher appeared before the same audience three times on one feast of the Assumption and

delivered three stirring homilies on the Dormition of the Mother of God. Excerpts from these sermons form part of the Divine Office of the Assumption in our own day. St. John traces the traditions of the past for his hearers and points out how Mary's corporeal Assumption was the most fitting complement of the incomparable privileges which God had bestowed upon her. His sermons indicate that for the faithful of the 8th century, the feast of the Dormition commemorated the death, burial, and bodily entry into heaven of the Mother of God. The Greeks preferred to refer to Mary's demise as a dormition or sleep rather than death, not because they doubted that she actually died, but because the separation of her soul from her body was so brief that it seemed but a mere repose.

It is principally in the second homily of St. John Damascene that we find a full account of the Virgin's death and Assumption. We must note carefully, however, that St. John does not intend his sermon as a strictly accurate narration of what actually took place, for he constantly makes use of such phrases as: "It seems to me," "it is likely," and "perhaps." His sole intention is to stir the hearts of his hearers, and in this he succeeds admirably. Hear his own introduction: "It does not seem to me to be out of place in the sermon which I am preaching, to describe to the best of my ability, to conjecture, and to set forth in outline the events which came to pass in the Holy Mother of God, which in a brief and only too synoptic form, we have received from former times."⁵

The preacher sets the stage with Mary lying on a humble bed in the same room where Christ celebrated the Last Supper and where the Holy Ghost descended upon the Apostles. A great crowd of the faithful had gathered there to beseech Mary not to depart, but to remain and be their consolation, and the Apostles echoed their plea. Soon Jesus came to receive the holy soul of His Blessed Mother, who addressed Him, saying: "Into Your hands, my Son, do I commend my spirit. Receive my soul which is dear to You, and which You have preserved stainless. I offer my body to You and not to the earth. Keep it safe, You Who were pleased to dwell in it, and Who in birth preserved it virginal. You have come to me, that where You are, I shall also be dwelling with You."

⁵ The Second Sermon on the Dormition. Cf. Mitchel, Valentine, S. M., *The Mariology of St. John Damascene*. (Maryhurst, 1930) p. 147.

St. John Damascene continues: "When the pure body had been washed, it was wrapped in a clean winding-sheet and again placed on the bed; lamps and ointments were brought, whilst the angels, the Apostles, and the holy Fathers sang suitable hymns under the influence of the Holy Ghost. Finally, the Apostles raised the true Ark of the Lord on their shoulders and carried it through the midst of the city to the Garden of Gethsemane, as the ark of the covenant was carried to Mount Sion in the days of King David; angels preceded and followed, covering the bier with their wings. A great number of the faithful formed the funeral procession. Thus, whilst Mary's soul was carried to the throne of God by the angels, her holy body, hidden in the splendor of the unseen divinity of the King of Kings, was carried by the Apostles to the grave, whence it was translated to the delights of the celestial Eden."⁶

The Doctor of the Assumption brings his homily to a close with a striking figure. He addresses the tomb of Mary and charges it to tell what has become of its precious treasure. The sepulcher replies: "Why do you seek in the tomb her who has been raised to heavenly tabernacles? Why do you demand an account of corruption from me? I have not the power to resist the divine commands. The holy and pure body left the winding-sheets, and after it had given me a share of its holiness, and filled me with perfume and fragrance, and made me a sacred place, it was taken away, guarded by the angels and archangels, and by all the heavenly powers."⁷

Once again it must be remembered that St. John looks upon the details he presents, not as actual facts, but as possibilities, conjectures of what might have been. He does not attempt to give them a certitude they do not deserve; as a talented preacher, he uses details to complete the scene he is depicting and to arouse the faithful to a more fervent devotion to the Mother of God. There is a definite "Jerusalem Tradition" concerning the death and burial of Mary to which some theologians attribute not a little authenticity. This tradition includes the following details: that Mary lived in the Cenacle and that St. John the Evangelist cared for her there; that the Apostles were present at Mary's death; that Jesus came to receive her soul; and that her body was laid to rest in the garden of Gethsemane. The

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 151.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 153.

origin of this "Jerusalem Tradition," however, is uncertain and thus lacks the credibility of the other traditions of the Church.

This, then, was the Assumption until the Holy Year of 1950: a doctrine based principally on the oral tradition of the liturgy, the teaching of the Doctors, theological conclusions, and a few reasons of convenience, surrounded with details which were, at best, probable. Now it has been our privilege to witness the solemn definition of Mary's Assumption into heaven as an infallible dogma of faith, the first such declaration of our century. Not since the Holy Father defined the dogma of his own Infallibility has the world heard the voice of Peter raised in solemn pronouncement. The hearts of Catholics everywhere are grateful, first that they were permitted to witness the definition of a dogma, and then that this dogma should be the glorious Assumption of Mary, the Mother of us all.

Had St. John Damascene been allowed to return to the world to preach the sermon on the occasion of this solemn definition, we feel certain that the Doctor of the Assumption would have repeated the same words he used on that 15th of August so many centuries ago: "For the body of her whose virginity remained intact in childbirth, having departed this life, is kept incorrupt and is transferred to a better and more divine abode, not interrupted by death, but enduring through endless generations. As the sun is eclipsed by the moon for a short space of time, and then reappears in all its brightness, so Mary's body was hidden by death, but soon appeared in a new splendor, for she is the very Source of Life and Light."⁸

⁸ First Sermon on the Dormition. Cf. Mitchel, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

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