

Please note, we are re-running reflections from the last B cycle, 2018.

Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Rv 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab

1 Cor 15:20-27

Lk 1:39-56

By Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D.

The Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated throughout most of the Christian world, is not a likely candidate to arouse wild enthusiasm or become the occasion for shifting the profit margins of the world as the result of commercial exploitations of a peasant woman achieving her final reward! Nor – beyond that – will the strange language that defines the occasion titillate the imagination of the post-modern mind:

Assumption of Mary. This term (from the Latin *assumere*, meaning "to take up") refers to the dogma that was officially proclaimed by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950. The dogmatic definition of the Assumption of Mary, which states that after the completion of her earthly life, the Blessed Virgin Mary was taken up, body and soul, into heavenly glory, does not decide whether Mary died or whether she went to sleep in the Lord and was then assumed into heavenly glory; this second view is called the *Dormition of Mary*. (See CCC 966)ⁱ

Yet, everything that the Church teaches us about Mary, the Mother of God, is intended to help us grow closer to her son Jesus Christ, and lead us into a deeper understanding of who he is and what he has done for us. It is important, then, that we understand the feast of the Assumption against the horizon of this salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ. This dogma may be said to have been revealed through the ordinary faithful as much as to the Church through the official Magisterium.

The strongest evidence is found in ancient liturgies and early homilies in honor of Mary's passing, and those signal the belief that Mary was taken up and is now in heaven with both her body and her soul. That belief was sustained as part of the teaching of the Catholic Church since the earliest centuries of Christianity. In the Middle Ages the *Transitus* writings (later declared apocryphal) spoke of Mary's perpetual virginity, but especially Mary's body as a *glorious tabernacle*, a *living vessel*, and a *heavenly temple*. By the end of the Middle Ages, belief in Mary's Assumption into heaven was well established theologically and part of the devotional expressions of the people.

According to Roman Catholic biblical scholars, the Doctrine of the Assumption is not to be found in scripture in a **literal** and **explicit** form. But that is not the same as saying that they are not in scripture. The Roman Catholic Church considers this doctrine to have been revealed by God in respect of it having emerged in the Church consciousness as a result of prayer and reflection on the Word of God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This reality is particularly notable in the process that was utilized by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950. Michael O'Carroll, C.S.Sp. explains:

The faith of the Church had been manifest in different ways. Between 1849 and 1950, numerous petitions for the dogma arrived in Rome. They came from one hundred and thirteen Cardinals, eighteen Patriarchs, twenty-five-hundred-five archbishops and bishops, thirty-two-thousand priests and men religious, fifty-thousand religious women, eight million lay people. On May 1, 1946 the Pope had sent to the bishops of the world the Encyclical *Deiparae Virginis*, putting this question to them: 'More especially we wish to know if you, Venerable Brethren, with your learning and prudence consider that the bodily Assumption of the Immaculate Blessed Virgin can be proposed and defined as a dogma of faith and whether in addition to your own wishes this is desired by your clergy and people.' When the replies were collated, it was found that twenty-two residential bishops out of 1181 dissented, but only six doubted that the Assumption was revealed truth--the others questioned the opportuneness.ⁱⁱ

Pius XII considered this response as a "certain and firm proof" that the Assumption is a truth revealed by God. In the light of a long history of Christian belief since patristic times, in 1950, he defined Mary's Assumption into Heaven as a dogma of Roman Catholicism in the encyclical: *Munificentissimus Deus*: "*the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heaven.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

Scripture scholars Laurie Brink, OP and Paul Colloton, OSFS provide a most helpful reflection on how the readings for today can assist us in bringing the biblical and the dogmatic notions to meaningful application to our lives in faith.

Typical of apocalyptic works, the book of Revelation is filled with symbols and images that serve as coded language; Today's reading speaks of God's appearance (theophany) as symbolized by the visible Ark of the Covenant. The dramatic imagery of a woman giving birth has often been thought to symbolize Mary the mother of Jesus. However, as scholars note, the woman is likely an image of the church in travail, caught between the end of the evil age and God's reign.....

Paul shares a similar apocalyptic world-view with the author of Revelation as seen in today's second reading.... According to Paul, Adam represented humanity enslaved by sin, and Christ was the first-fruits who redeem humanity. The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that this new age has dawned and is in the process of fulfillment, if one stands firm in the faith.....,

Mary visited Elizabeth. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, greeted Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," From his conception Christ was blessed and holy, and Mary was recognized as the mother of the Lord. Later in Luke's Gospel a woman interrupts Jesus' teaching and proclaims, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed" (Luke 11:27). Mary has a unique role in salvation history. God was with her throughout her life, And because of that, because she is Theotokos, the Godbearer, the Church teaches that her body never saw corruption. The woman in today's reading from Revelation "fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God" (Revelation 12:6a). Mary had a place prepared for her by God at the end of her life. She simply fell asleep and was taken up to heaven.^{iv}

The words of St. Thomas Aquinas seem fitting: "To one with eyes of faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible." We simply say with Elizabeth: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

*Watch this 5 min. video:

<http://www.franciscansforjustice.org/2017/03/19/the-magnificat-marys-song-of-nonviolence-2/>

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ⁱ John T. Ford, CSC, St. Mary's Press Glossary of Theological Terms, Essentials in Theology Series, (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2006), 23.

ⁱⁱ Michael O'Carroll, *Theotokos : A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), 56.

ⁱⁱⁱ See http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html. See also Lumen Gentium Chapter 8 – especially §§ 65 and 68. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

^{iv} Laurie Brink, OP and Paul Colloton, OSFS, *Living the Word: Scripture and Commentaries for Sundays and Holy Days – Year B* [December 3, 2017-November 25, 2018], (Franklin Park, IL: World Library Publications, 2017), 162-163.