

The Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary

What might it have to say to us?



Thursday, 15th August, was the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary. The teaching of the Assumption of Mary is held by Roman Catholics, the Eastern Churches - both Orthodox and Catholic - and some Anglicans. The teaching expressed in this Solemnity does not have a basis in Scripture, and for that reason Anglicans are divided over it. In the Roman Catholic Tradition, it is something that developed in the hearts of the faithful over many centuries and was finally declared dogma by Pope Pius XII in 1950. In his document, *Munificentissimus Deus*, Pius XII declared that Mary, “when the course of her earthly life was run, was assumed in body and soul to heavenly glory”. This teaching expresses the belief in the intrinsic goodness and virtue of Mary who, chosen by God to bear and give birth to Jesus, is therefore considered to have been born free of the effects of original sin. This teaching is called the Immaculate Conception. Because of this, it is held that Mary was spared the normal process of bodily decay and was ‘assumed’ into heaven.

In the Orthodox Tradition, it is called the *Dormition*, the Falling Asleep of Mary. Among Eastern Christians, both Eastern Catholic and Orthodox, the traditions surrounding this belief are drawn from a fourth century document, *The Account of Saint John the Theologian of the Falling Asleep of the Holy Mother of God*. This document, written in the voice of John the evangelist, the one to whom Jesus entrusted his mother as they both stood at the foot of the cross, recounts how the Archangel Gabriel came to Mary while she was praying at the tomb in Jerusalem in which

Jesus had been laid and from which he rose, and told Mary that her earthly life had reached its end. Mary then returned to Bethlehem for her final days. All of the apostles were caught up in clouds by the Holy Spirit and transported to Bethlehem to be with Mary and together they carried her bed, again with the help of the Holy Spirit, to her home in Jerusalem where, on the following Sunday, Christ appeared to her and told her not to fear. While Peter sang a hymn, “the face of the mother of the Lord shone brighter than the light, and she rose up and blessed each of the apostles with her own hand, and all gave glory to God, and the Lord stretched forth His undefiled hands, and received her holy and blameless soul ... And Peter, and I John, and Paul, and Thomas, ran and wrapped up her precious feet for the consecration; and the twelve apostles put her precious and holy body upon a couch, and carried it”. They took Mary’s body to the Garden of Gethsemane where they placed it in a new tomb, “and behold, a perfume of sweet savour came forth out of the holy sepulchre of our Lady of the mother of God; and for three days the voices of invisible angels were heard glorifying Christ our God, who had been born of her. And when the third day was ended, the voices were no longer heard; and from that time forth all knew that her spotless and precious body had been transferred to paradise”.

This fourth century Eastern text is the earliest extant version of the story. The earliest Latin versions of the story of the Assumption were written a few centuries later. They differ in some detail but also proclaim that Mary died, that Christ received her soul, that the apostles entombed her body and that her body was taken up into heaven. From the fourth century onwards the Eastern churches held steadily to this tradition and we also find homilies on the Assumption going back to the sixth century. In the West, however, there was some hesitancy, but by the thirteenth century there was universal agreement.

There is no account in Scripture of Mary’s assumption into heaven but there are various Scriptural texts in both the Old and New Testaments that are interpreted as referring to Mary and pointing to this teaching. In the Book of Revelation or the Apocalypse, the last Book of the Bible, in chapter twelve, there is a text which describes a woman caught up in the battle between good and evil: “Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman, adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, and with the twelve stars on her head for a crown. She was pregnant, and in labour, crying aloud in the pangs of childbirth. Then a second sign appeared in the sky, a huge red dragon which had seven heads and ten horns, and each of the seven heads crowned with a coronet. Its tail dragged a third of the stars from the sky and dropped them to the earth, and the dragon stopped in front of the woman as she was having the child, so that he could eat it as soon as it was born from its mother. The woman brought a male child into the world, the son who was to rule all the nations with an iron scepter, and the child was taken straight up to God and his throne, while the woman escaped into the desert, where God had made a place of safety ready. Then I heard a voice shout from heaven, ‘Victory and power and empire for ever have been won by our God, and all authority for his Christ’”.

The woman in this symbolic and visionary writing is often seen as 'God's people', and as Mary is understood or interpreted as an embodiment of God's people, those of both the Old and New Testaments, Mary's assumption into heaven is thus seen as an exemplification of this woman's victory. So in this vision Mary represents the people of God and the Church, and the red dragon which attacks her represents the Roman Empire and evil in general. At the time this was written the Roman army had attacked and sacked Jerusalem and there was immense suffering and destruction, hence the symbolism of the red dragon. It is through the woman and the child, the channels of Divine power, that the evil of the Roman Empire, and more broadly evil in general, are overcome.

In the Old Testament we also find texts which are interpreted as referring to Mary. In the Book of Psalms, Psalm 45 presents us with some glorious wedding music and song, and Pope Pius XII at the time of the declaration of this dogma, reasoned that this wedding music prefigures the Assumption: "All glorious is the princess within her chamber; her gown is interwoven with gold. In embroidered garments she is led to the king".

In the sixth century a bishop of Jericho, Theoteknos, was the first person to analyze the tradition of the Assumption. He looked at the Old Testament story of the prophet Elijah who ascended to heaven and he also looked at the assurance of Jesus to the apostles that a place had been prepared for them in heaven, and he concluded that so much the more must Mary have ascended to a place prepared for her. In the Book of Exodus too we find a text which is linked to the Assumption. The liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt is described in this way: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (19:4). As Mary is often seen as symbolic of the people of Israel, this text too is seen as foreshadowing the Assumption.

Let's explore this teaching a little more deeply. When Pope Pius XII proclaimed this teaching in 1950 the world was in the middle of the tumultuous twentieth century. Humanity had seen the horror of two world wars and the Holocaust, the desecration of the human body and life. Was Pius XII responding to the need to reaffirm the dignity and sacredness of the human body and person in the aftermath of such carnage? The teaching of the Assumption of Mary does just that. The twentieth century writer, Graham Greene, says that the proclamation of this Feast must be seen not in terms of literalism but rather in the overflow of a Mystery that concerns *us* as much as it concerns Mary. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, said that it was the most important religious declaration of the twentieth century and in fact the most important religious teaching since the sixteenth century Reformation. He saw the symbolism of such a declaration at that time, in the mid twentieth century. The story of the Assumption, said Jung, symbolized the mystery of human destiny. As you know, Jung was the great proponent of what

he termed our 'collective unconscious' and he saw the Assumption in this light. In the story of Mary's assumption into heaven he saw a mythological and therefore a spiritual symbol of a Mystery in which we are still caught up. More than just a story about Mary, Jung sensed that conveyed in this story was the numinous or spiritual layer in humanity and the confirmation of human dignity. In the Church's declaration that Mary had been physically assumed into heaven Jung saw the Church as finally accepting the physical world and finally moving beyond the dualism which so plagued the Christian understanding of the human person - the split between body and spirit and the, at times, overwhelming rejection of the body as sinful and corrupt and a thing to be scorned. He also saw this declaration that a *woman* had been bodily assumed into heaven as celebrating the feminine element in creation. He said it addressed the "profoundest problem affecting the human psyche: an imbalance which favoured masculine principles over feminine ones". The story of the Assumption, he said, went a long way towards redressing that imbalance.

American psychologist and former Catholic priest, Eugene Cullen Kennedy, in similar manner says that the Assumption "invites us to tap into the vein of rich spiritual ore that runs just beneath the surface of a teaching that is radically diminished when it is presented literally". He says that the Assumption proclaims the end of the split between Earth and Heaven and all the divisions, such as between flesh and spirit, that flowed from that. It heralded the unity of the universe and the unity of the human personality. And he goes on to say that this is the richest and least plumbed aspect of this Feast.

There is much to ponder in this teaching and as we do a vast richness opens up for us. There is beautiful imagery in the prayers of the Solemnity of the Assumption too. In the morning prayer of that day we are invited to "See the beauty of the daughter of Jerusalem, who ascended to heaven like the rising sun at dawn". And the Antiphons of that day (the verses that are chanted as part of the opening or conclusion of the service) declare: "Whither goest thou, bright as the morn? All beautiful and sweet art thou, O daughter of Zion, fair as the moon elect as the sun". Mary is "taken up into the bridal chamber of heaven, where the King of Kings sits on his starry throne". When we read these words through Jung's lens and see in them the mythological expression of all creation, humanity included, glorified and transformed, radically accepted by God, we find in the Assumption a powerful testimony to the destiny of creation, the reconciliation of the material and spiritual world. The Assumption thus speaks to us of the Divine heart of creation, our 'collective unconscious', and the future that is open to every human being.

As Mary spent her life walking closely with God, so may we too, in utter openness to God's way and saying 'yes' to God's call, look forward to a life caught up in the Divine glory. Like Israel,

like the Church, like Mary, the person who travels with God will be taken to a place of sanctity and security. If we are indeed to do this and see in Mary's destiny a foreshadowing of our own, we need to look at this woman of faith. And the very heartbeat of Mary is in these words: "Let it be done to me as you have said". Just like Mary we are called to become bearers of Christ. We are called to transformation, both here and now, and in the future.

Blessed is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled.



*Ms Kerry McCullough
Spirituality and Liturgy Coordinator*