

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

ISSUE: What does the Church teach concerning the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary?

RESPONSE: The teaching is aptly summarized in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 974:

The Most Blessed Virgin Mary, when the course of her earthly life was completed, was taken up [“assumed”] body and soul into the glory of heaven, where she already shares in the glory of her Son’s Resurrection, anticipating the resurrection of all members of his Body.

The doctrine of Mary’s Assumption is firmly rooted in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, and this constant teaching was infallibly defined as a dogma of the Catholic faith by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

DISCUSSION: In a document entitled *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), Pope Pius XII solemnly defined the dogma of the Assumption as follows:

The Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory. In defining the Assumption, Pope Pius XII refers to the other three Marian dogmas: Immaculate Conception, Perpetual Virginity, and Mother of God.

This vividly illustrates the point that the Assumption is intimately connected to other Marian doctrines, especially Mother of God and Immaculate Conception.

Simply Incorruptible

No one obeyed the Fourth Commandment (“Honor your father and your mother”) more fully than Jesus, who is Son of God and Son of Mary. It is fitting that Jesus would uniquely honor His mother—truly the Mother of God—by preserving her from the corruption of the grave and by glorifying her body in heaven before the general resurrection of the body for all the other saints on the last day.

There is even a stronger connection between the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception. The key Scripture verse is Genesis 3:15, in which the Lord says that He will put enmity between Satan and the “woman,” who is identified as the Mother of the Redeemer. “Enmity” means “total opposition.”

This verse foreshadows Mary’s participation in the absolute victory of her seed (Jesus) over Satan. According to St. Paul, the consequences of Satan’s influence on the human race are twofold: sin and death (e.g., Rom. 5:21; 6:16; 6:23; 8:2; Gal. 6:7-8; Heb. 2:14-15). Therefore, Mary, who shared in her Son’s victory over Satan, would have to be saved from both sin and the corruption of death to ensure her enmity or “total opposition” toward the devil.

By a special favor granted to her by her Lord and Savior, Mary indeed did triumph over sin in her Immaculate Conception. Corruption of the body is a result of original sin. Because Mary was preserved from original sin in her Immaculate Conception, and because she sustained the fullness of grace given to her by God (cf. Lk. 1:28), Our Lady could not have experienced the consequences of original sin. And so Mary also triumphed over the bodily corruption of death in her glorious Assumption.

The Assumption in Divine Revelation

In addition to Genesis 3:15, there are several other Scripture passages that point to the Assumption of Our Lady. For example, there is Luke 1:28, since her bodily assumption is a natural consequence of her being “full of grace.” Other passages include Revelation 12:1, in which Mary’s coronation implies her bodily assumption, and 1 Corinthians 15:23 and Matthew 27:52-53, which support the possibility of a bodily assumption. And lastly there is Psalm 132:8, which provides: “Arise, O Lord, into your resting place: you and the ark which you have sanctified.” Mary is the new ark of the covenant (cf. Rev. 11:19-12:1), who physically bore the presence of God in her womb (cf. Lk. 1:42) before bearing Christ to the world.

The Assumption is also witnessed by Sacred Tradition. For example, St. Gregory of Tours (d. 593) wrote: “[The Lord] ordered that [Mary’s] holy body be taken and carried up to heaven. There she is now, joined once more to her soul; she exults with the elect, rejoicing in the eternal blessings that will have no end.”¹ The doctrine was also explicitly taught by Church Fathers such as St. Germain of Constantinople, St. Andrew of Crete, and St. John Damascene.

There is a maxim that provides “Lex orandi, lex credendi” (“the law of praying is the law of believing”). This maxim summarizes the truth that the liturgical life of the People of God plays an important role in preserving and celebrating the faith of the Church. Already in the sixth century there were liturgical feasts dedicated to Mary’s Assumption. And indeed, from the thirteenth century on, the doctrine of Mary’s Assumption was taught with near unanimity in both the West and East. And the Rosary, which includes a decade on the Assumption, has been an important part of Catholic piety since the early thirteenth century.

The Extent of the Magisterial Teaching In defining the Assumption as a revealed dogma, Pope Pius XII did not infallibly answer all the questions that relate to the “where, when, and how” of the Assumption. For example, we do not know how old Mary was and whom she was with at the time. Also, the Holy Father did not attempt to resolve the controversy as to whether she was in Ephesus or Jerusalem, as there was no mention of where she was at the time of her Assumption. In addition, Pope Pius XII’s definition said nothing about Mary’s mediation, her queenship, or other privileges.

And significantly, Pope Pius XII did not solemnly affirm the fact of Mary’s death. Note that the definition intentionally uses the ambiguous phraseology, “having completed the course of her earthly life.” This has led to further speculation on the topic, as theologians in recent centuries have advanced the opinion that Mary did not die, contending that her Immaculate Conception freed her from the effects of original sin, including death.

The well-attested and ancient tradition, however, is that Mary did indeed die, so that she could be more fully conformed to her Son. In a General Audience on June 25, 1997, Pope John Paul II clearly affirmed the view, teaching: “To share in Christ’s Resurrection, Mary had first to share in His death.” Thus Mary freely accepted death in order to more fully associate herself with her Son’s redemption (cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 58).

It is important to note that Mary’s death, however it occurred, was a peaceful death that did not involve the bodily corruption that usually accompanies death as a consequence of original sin. As the Holy Father explained at the General Audience noted above.

It is more important to look for the Blessed Virgin’s spiritual attitude at the moment of her departure from this world. In this regard, St. Francis de Sales maintains that Mary’s death was due to a transport of love.

Whatever from the physical point of view was the organic, biological cause of the end of her bodily life, it can be said that for Mary the passage from this life to the next was the full development of grace in glory, so that no death can ever be so fittingly described as a “dormition” [“falling asleep”] as hers.

Why a Dogma of the Faith?

It is fair to ask why it was necessary to have the dogma defined. After all, the doctrine of the Assumption was already accepted throughout the Church and, unlike the Immaculate Conception before it was solemnly defined in 1854 by Pope Pius IX, the teaching of the Assumption was never the subject of controversy.

However, following the definition of the Immaculate Conception, the Vatican received millions of petitions from bishops, priests, religious, and laity asking for the definition of Mary's Assumption. The popes after Pius IX encouraged the movement for the dogmatic definition. Finally, Pope Pius XII in 1946 sent a letter entitled *Deiparae Virginis Mariae* to all the bishops in the world in which he asked them whether (a) the teaching can be proposed as a dogma and (b) whether the people desired it. The result was staggering. Out of 1232 bishops, 1210 answered "yes" to both questions. Such near unanimity among the bishops regarding doctrinal pronouncements is almost unprecedented in Church history. And so the theological principle used to justify the proclamation of the dogma was the uniform faith of the whole Church. In his dogmatic pronouncement, the Holy Father appeals to the Church's teaching authority and the constant faith of the Christian people, which that same teaching authority "sustains and directs" in proclaiming Mary's bodily Assumption to be a revealed truth (cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 12, 25).

The solemn proclamation of God's Word has historically been an occasion of tremendous joy and grace in the Church. One calls to mind, for example, the celebration of the faithful when Mary was declared "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*) at the Council of Ephesus in 431, or, in Old Testament times, the tears of the Israelites when Ezra read the words of the law to them after their return from exile (cf. Neh. 8:5-12).

At the close of *Munificentissimus Deus*, Pope Pius XII exhorts the faithful as follows:

[T]his solemn proclamation and definition of the Assumption will contribute in no small way to the advantage of human society, since it redounds to the glory of the Most Blessed Trinity, to which the Blessed Mother of God was bound by such singular bonds. It is to be hoped that all the faithful will be stirred up to a stronger piety toward their heavenly Mother, and that the souls of all those who glory in the Christian name may be moved by the desire of sharing in the unity of Christ's Mystical Body and of increasing their love for her who in all things shows her motherly heart to the members of [Christ's] Body. . . . In this magnificent way, all may see clearly to what a lofty goal our bodies and souls are destined. Finally, it is our hope that belief in Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven will make our belief in our own resurrection stronger and render it more effective.

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How Lovely Is Her Dwelling Place

Even though your most holy and blessed soul was separated from your most happy and immaculate body, according to the usual course of nature, and even though it was carried to a proper burial place, nevertheless it did not remain under the dominion of death, nor was it destroyed by corruption.

Indeed, just as her virginity remained intact when she gave birth, so her body, even after death, was preserved from decay and transferred to a better and more divine dwelling place. There it is no longer subject to death but abides for all ages.

-St. John Damascene (d. c. 750) taken from Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (Ignatius Press, 1999)

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1 As quoted in Luigi Gambero, S.M., *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 35.