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## THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN<sup>1</sup>

THE Holy Father has not been hasty in satisfying the desire of the Catholic world that he should define the Assumption. For over two hundred years petitions have been pouring in to Rome. It is said that between 1849 and 1940 there were over 2,500 from Cardinals, Patriarchs, Archbishops and Bishops. Some theologians thought there was already sufficient agreement to create a moral unanimity, and that the Assumption could, without further definition, be regarded as a doctrine of the Church. For Catholics have always believed that the Holy Spirit guides the Church, and that the whole Church would not agree in error. Petitions came in with notable frequency during the Holy Year of 1925, as formerly at the time of the Vatican Council. Moreover, it seemed that, once the Immaculate Conception was defined, there remained no theological doubt about the Assumption.

The present Pope, however, like his predecessors was cautious, and at one time it looked as though he would not accede to these demands. Eventually in May 1946, he asked all the Bishops of the World what devotion to the Assumption existed among the clergy and faithful in their various dioceses, and particularly whether they thought that the bodily Assumption could be defined as a dogma of the faith. He finally asked whether they and their people wanted it. The answer to this questionnaire was almost unanimous in favour both of the definition and its opportuneness. Yet still the Holy Father hesitated. He consulted the Church's doctors, he appointed theologians to study Scripture and Tradition, he asked for prayers. Only after several more years of prayer did Pius XII eventually declare to the world his decision to define this doctrine so long accepted in Catholic tradition without hesitation.

It was a supreme gesture to the world that the Church's first concern is with the future life. When most of the world is concerned with this life, divided into the supporters of communistic materialism and their opponents anxious to save worldly prosperity, the Church, which is so often accused by her enemies of being political, makes the central event of her holy year the proclamation of the supreme spiritual privilege given to one who while still more than a girl bore in her sinless womb the Maker of the world.

Protestants are our allies against materialism, naturalism and rationalism, but often they have been brought up in an atmosphere out of sympathy with the ancient Catholic tradition. They often appear to Catholics to have lost, not all faith, but what Newman called the principle of faith, according to which it is regarded as a privilege to

<sup>1</sup> This article may be obtained in pamphlet form, price 3d., from St Michael's, Moor Street, Birmingham, published by the Legion of Mary.

believe and a loss not to believe whatever God has thought fit to reveal to mankind. Sometimes the idea of a Church guided by the Spirit is either repugnant or forgotten. In such extreme cases, Protestants appear to the Catholic to look upon Christianity as a series of truths, the acceptance of which forms the price they pay for the privileges of Christianity, rather than as a great supernatural world of truth, which stands or falls as a whole.

Fortunately this is not true of all Protestants and, especially in England, many non-Catholics call themselves Catholics and have for many years been feeding on Catholic truth, re-discovering sometimes truths which had been lost sight of in the years since they became divided from us. But we feel they still have a long way to go in honouring the Mother who had the incredible privilege of bringing the Son of God into the world and looking after him, and standing by him at the cross. In so far as they neglect her, they cut themselves off at once from all the Christian centuries before the Reformation, as well as from the whole Catholic Church of to-day, they even cut themselves off from the separated Eastern Christians. Catholics have always feared that such neglect of the Mother makes it psychologically easier to neglect the Son, or at least to hold abstract and unreal ideas of the Incarnation and Redemption.

So-called Bible Protestants adopted, as a basis of their minimizing attitude, a position not based on the Scriptures or on Catholic Tradition, that they need not—or must not—accept any doctrine which they cannot discover by their private judgement in the Scriptures. Unfortunately there have been cases where this attitude has not kept them true even to all that is in Scripture. But their position always had the negative advantage, from their point of view, of making it possible for them to exclude with greater assurance anything not to their mind, provided it is not obviously in the Scripture text.

This is clearly not the position of all, as indeed it is not the official position of the Church of England. To such we can therefore appeal with some degree of confidence to follow our argument with sympathy.

#### THE ARGUMENT FROM THE CONSENT OF THE FAITHFUL

Though the Holy Father prudently hesitated even after receiving the replies of the bishops which made the doctrine so certainly the teaching of the Church, he admitted in the beginning of his encyclical of 1st November 1950, that it was this unanimity of bishops and faithful which removed the least possibility of doubt. He speaks of the 'singular agreement of Catholic bishops and faithful', which 'shows by itself with a certainty immune from error that this privilege (the Assumption) is a truth revealed by God and contained in the divine deposits that Christ

delivered to His spouse to be faithfully kept'. He tells us that the truth of Mary's assumption into the glory of heaven could not be known by any natural powers, but only by the revelation of God.

#### SINLESSNESS IMPLIES CORRUPTION

But he sees the reason for this general agreement about the doctrine in the connexion between sinlessness and freedom from the corruption which follows upon death.

St Paul in his Letter to the Philippians tells us that God's plan of redemption for us is eventually 'to form this humbled body of ours anew, moulding it into the image of his glorified body, so effective is his power to make all things obey him' (Phil. iii, 21). If we had never sinned, this body of ours would not have been 'humbled', and would not have needed such radical new forming. It would have been as glorious and comely as our soul would have been sinless. The reason why we find it so much harder to think of glorified bodies than of glorified souls is that we are so much more impressed by bodily suffering and weakness than we are by the sinfulness of our souls.

God's original design for us was immortality and freedom from suffering, a sinless soul in an immortal body. Thus we read in the Book of Wisdom: 'God, to be sure, framed man for an immortal destiny, the created image of His own endless being; but, since the devil's envy brought death into the world, they make him their model that take him for their master' (ii, 24-5, Knox). Sin and death are put down to the woman in Ecclesiasticus, xxv, 33. 'From the woman came the beginning of sin and through her we all die.' They are put down to Adam in St Paul, Romans v, 12 '... by one man sin entered into this world, and by sin death . . .' In other places sin and death are inseparably connected (Romans vi, 23) (James i, 15). And it was not until after the first sin that God put His threat into execution: 'Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return' (Genesis ii, 17). Full Redemption will be not merely the saving of man's soul. God's designs will not be fully carried out until the body in which we have suffered and wanted, which has been exposed to hunger and blows, which laboured for God and man, is freed together with the soul and led to an everlasting youth of strength and beauty. Only such a redemption is a true human redemption. For man is body and soul; man is a spirit spiritualizing some of this world's matter.

When the Light that enlightened every man that cometh into this world came to redeem his creatures the darkness could not comprehend it—a darkness it was of man's making—a cloud of sin so dense that God's light could not penetrate it. From that sin came all division, all disunity, all strife. Strife between God and man, strife between man and man, strife between body and soul, strife between mind and passions.

## SECOND CENTURY FATHERS TEACH THIS DOCTRINE

Nothing is more certainly and universally witnessed by the early Fathers than this widely attested Scripture doctrine that all suffering, death, strife and division of every kind came not from God but from man's sin. The Fathers recognized that man was naturally mortal, but they all insisted that God had intended him because of his likeness to God to have the further gift of immortality and incorruption. St Irenaeus is so convinced that this was God's intention that he says that if man were to lose his life and never receive it back through the merits of Christ, God would have been overcome by the devil. 'For if the man who had been made by God that he might live, should lose his life, hurt by the Serpent who had corrupted him, and no more return to life, but be quite abandoned unto death; God would have been overcome, and the wickedness of the Serpent would have prevailed against His will' (Adv. Haer, 3-23-1). Many of those St Irenaeus was opposing thought that flesh as such was evil and must corrupt, forgetting that the worst of them was not their mortal and weak flesh, but their sinful and impure soul, forgetting that it is only impurity of soul which brought corruption of body. 'For as the flesh is susceptible of corruption, so is also of incorruption, and as of death, so also of life . . . For if Death made man a corpse, why shall not Life come and quicken the man? . . . For if the flesh could not be saved, by no means had the Word of God been made flesh' (5-12-1). 'For the glory of God is a living Man . . .' (4-20-7). To those agnostics who considered flesh as something dishonourable St Irenaeus said: They 'dishonour the Incarnation which takes place by the pure generation of the Word of God, and defraud man of his ascent unto God, and are unthankful to the Word of God, Who for them was made flesh. For to this end, the Word of God was made man, and He Who is the Son of God, Son of Man, that man blended with God's Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the Son of God. Since we could not otherwise receive incorruption and immortality, but by being united to Incorruption and Immortality, and how could we be united to incorruption and immortality, without Incorruption and Immortality being first made that which we are?'

This is expressed a little more clearly perhaps in another second-century writer, St Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch: 'But someone will say: "Is not death part of man's nature?"' Not at all. "Was man then immortal?" We do not say that either. It will be answered: "Was he then nothing at all?" We do not hold this either. This is what we hold; by nature man was neither mortal nor immortal. If he had been created from the beginning immortal, he would have been created God. On the other hand, if he had been created mortal, God would have seemed to be the cause of his death. He was not then either mortal or immortal when created, but (according to what we have said above), capable of

either. So, if following God's commandment, he turned in the direction of immortality, he would have received immortality as a reward and become divine (*theos*). If on the other hand he should turn towards the works of death by disobeying God, he would become the cause of his own death. As a matter of fact, God made man free and master of himself.'

#### FOURTH CENTURY FATHERS

The same truth that all death and corruption came into the world through sin is expressed in the fourth century by St Athanasius. 'The presence and love of the Word had called them into being ; inevitably, therefore, when they lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it ; for it is God alone who exists, evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good. By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing ; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt.

'This, then, was the plight of men. God had not only made them out of nothing, but had also graciously bestowed on them His own life by the grace of the Word. They turning from eternal things to things corruptible, by counsel of the devil, had become the cause of their own corruption in death ; for, as I said before, though they were by nature subject to corruption, the grace of their union with the Word made them capable of escaping from the natural law, provided that they retained the beauty of innocence with which they were created. That is to say, the presence of the Word with them shielded them even from natural corruption, as also Wisdom says : "God created man for incorruption and as an image of his own eternity ; but by envy of the devil death entered into the world". When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, they had in their sinning surpassed all limits ; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any one kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins . . . It would, of course, have been unthinkable that God should go back upon his word and that man, having transgressed, should not die ; but it was equally monstrous that beings which once had shared the nature of the Word should perish and turn back again into non-existence through corruption' (*De Incarnatione Verbi*, chap i, 4-5, C. S. Lewis's translation, London 1944).

St Basil, Sermon : God is not author of evil. 'God created the body, not sickness ; and God created the soul, not sin. But the soul was degraded, when untrue to its nature. Wherein consisted its chief

good? In union with God and union through love. When it had lost this, it was spoilt with all manner of sickness . . . God then did not create death, but we have ourselves put it on through our ruined nature.'

St Augustine, *City of God*, xiv, 26. 'In Paradise, then, man lived as he desired so long as he desired what God had commanded. He lived in the enjoyment of God, and was good by God's goodness; he lived without any want, and had it in his power so to live eternally . . . There was in his body not corruption, nor seed of corruption, which could produce in him any unpleasant sensation' (Dods' translation, Edinburgh 1872).

#### WE MIGHT HAVE ALL BEEN INCORRUPT

From all this you can see that it follows from the teaching of Scripture and universal tradition that the picture of Mary as the sinless one living with her body and soul in the glory of God is a picture of what God originally intended for all mankind. She was as Irenaeus tells us, a new beginning. 'Mary . . . a virgin, being obedient became both to herself and to all mankind the cause of salvation.' It is a strange fact that even the Koran regards Mary as free from original sin and sinless, and to this day she receives more honour among Muslims than all other women. Though God did not intend that we should have the supreme glory of being mother of God, nor even the lesser glory of the first creation of God and mother of all the living (as Eve was), yet we were originally intended by God to share her sinlessness, and so much beauty and holiness of soul that, if we were now to be able to see it, it would seem impossible for anyone to attain it. We were originally intended to share God's own bliss and glory. As we read in the words of Scripture 'God . . . framed man for an immortal destiny, the created image of His own endless being'.

This is why for Mary and her Son, there could be no suffering, death or corruption in the grave, if we had not sinned and the Son had not to share our suffering nature to redeem us. He did not have to share our corruption in the grave to save us. On the contrary, we are saved, according to St Paul, by his resurrection. We know how the Fathers of the earliest centuries gave us a picture of Mary, as free from sin as her son. Ephraim, *Carmina Nisibena*: 'Indeed you Lord and your Mother are the only ones, who are beautiful in every respect; for there is not in you, Lord, any stain, nor any disfigurement in your mother'. And again: 'But, virgin Lady, immaculate mother of God, my most glorious Lady, showerer of blessings upon me, more exalted than the stars, much more pure than the rays of the sun'. And again 'There are two innocent ones, two without guile, Mary and Eve, who were made absolutely equal (by God), and afterwards one was made the cause of death, the other the cause of our life'.

Pius XII, speaking of the Assumption in his Encyclical of 1st November says: 'This privilege shone forth with a new light when our predecessor solemnly defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. For the two privileges are most closely connected with each other. For Christ overcame sin and death by his own death; and he who is born from above in baptism conquers sin and death through the same Christ. But God did not wish to confer on the just full victory over death, by a general law, until the end of time. So the bodies of the just disintegrate after death, and not until the last day will they be joined to each other's glorious soul.

'But God wished the Blessed Virgin Mary to be exempt from this general law. For she, by a quite unique privilege, conquered sin in her immaculate conception, and so was not subject to that law of remaining in the grave, nor did she need to wait to the end of time for the redemption of the body.

'Hence, once it was solemnly defined that the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, was from the beginning free from hereditary stain, the souls of Christians were aroused to a more intense hope that the dogma of her bodily Assumption into heaven should be defined as soon as possible by the supreme authority of the Church.'

#### MARY SHARED ADAM'S PRIVILEGE

In other words, since the Church believed that Mary was sinless from the first moment of her creation, and that Mary was at least as highly privileged in this respect as Adam, and since the Scripture and the Church had ever taught that death and corruption only came from sin, the doctrine of Mary's utter sinlessness involved her freedom from the need to suffer, die and disintegrate in the grave. She nevertheless did suffer and die because it was God's will that her Son should redeem the race and that she should be associated with Him.

The Light which enlightens every man that comes into this world, which would fail to dispel all supervening darkness, shone upon Mary and drove away the cloud of sin from the first moment of her existence, and Mary was always what we all might have been, but for the darkness which at first received neither Him nor her, and put Him to death. It is strange that the darkness should be so attached to its darkness that it should resent Christ and His Mother being all light. Accept that, and you cannot deny her Assumption, except by denying the universal scriptural and traditional doctrine that death and corruption come only through sin. Some of the Fathers—as St Epiphanius in the fourth century—doubted whether our Lady really died, so much were they conscious that death was not God's original plan.



### WHY NO BODY OR RELICS PRESERVED ?

That popular opinion thought on the same lines as St Epiphanius is suggested by the strange fact that there exists no early tradition of Mary's body being preserved anywhere, that no one ever claimed to have any relics of that body, and that no one ever invented either body or relics. We know from the accounts of many pilgrims visiting the Holy Land before the fifth century that nothing was known of any tomb before that time. Needless to say, nothing is recorded of any tomb elsewhere at that time. When the guides do begin to point out a tomb near Jerusalem in the fifth century, it is one that everyone can see to be empty. They invented a tomb, but did not dare to invent a body ! Perhaps it is not so surprising when we know what they thought of Mary and how impossible they found it to associate a normal death and corruption with her. Is this perhaps why they do not invent a story as to where the body was taken ? Most early pilgrims are told that it is not known what happened to the body. Though apocryphal stories of the Assumption existed already at this time, in Palestine at least, these stories were not told to pilgrims by the guides.

We can only conclude that for reasons we can easily guess, the Christians who venerated the tombs of SS. Peter and Paul and other Apostles, failed to venerate the tomb or body of her whom they considered the holiest of mankind.

Most theologians hold that Mary died before being assumed. The Pope has made no definite statement on this. The basis of the common opinion is simply that in Scripture, e.g. in Genesis iii, 15 ; in Isaiah vii, 14, in the infancy-gospels of Luke and Matthew, Mary is always found united with her Son ; and Catholics usually find it impossible to credit that she was different from Him in any matter so important as either death or resurrection.

But, though also always joined to her Son, Mary is also one of us. In this sense she is the beginning of the new era with Christ ; the first-fruits of the redemption, of the New Testament ; the pattern of what all members of the Church are called to be in their final perfection. The Immaculate Conception and Assumption are rather privileges enabling her to unite us with her Son than privileges separating her from us.

### OTHER ARGUMENTS

Earlier writers looked to other arguments. Some of these may still be preferred by individual theologians. I will merely give a sample. Some argued, for instance, from the position and office of Mary with regard to her Son ; if it were possible for her to be spared the corruption of the grave, could so loving a Son have refused her this prerogative ? We have seen that it is more than possible ; it alone befits God's plan. To quote

Newman, 'Who can conceive, my brethren, that God should so repay the debt, which he condescended to owe to His Mother, for the elements of His human body, as to allow the flesh and blood from which it was taken to moulder in the grave? Do the sons of men thus deal with their Mothers? Do they not nourish and sustain them in their feebleness and keep them in life while they are able?' Or to quote a writer of the eighth century, who did more than any others perhaps to convince later Christendom of the doctrinal necessity of this teaching, 'Does it not follow from our Lord's graciousness that he should save his Mother's honour, for he came to fulfil the law, not to destroy it? And the law commands us to honour our mothers and condemns dishonour . . . For to rot and be the food of worms is the ignominy of our human state. Jesus is free from ignominy and therefore that nature of Mary, which Jesus is shown to have taken from her . . . I am unable to think that that most sacred body, from which Christ took flesh, in which he united the divine nature to the human . . . was delivered up to worms for food' (Pseudo-Augustinus, *De Assumptione Virginis*, v and vi).

Many other arguments have been put forward since the seventh century, when theological reasoning on the subject really begins, perhaps first in a work attributed to Modestus of Jerusalem. These arguments have been the fruit of 'the inquirer into heavenly truths' dwelling 'in the cell and the oratory, pouring forth his heart in prayer, collecting his thoughts in meditation, dwelling on the idea of Jesus, or of Mary, or of grace, or of eternity, and pondering the words of holy men who have gone before him' (Newman, *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, p. 343). Modestus was conscious of being a pioneer; he expresses surprise that preachers before his time had not spoken about the Assumption. The people come eager to hear about the last days of the Mother of God, and he feels compelled to do something in answer to their pious desire. He does not pretend, however, to know details of her death, putting forward what he does with due qualifications, as known only to God or the Saviour. His conviction comes, as is clear, not from stories he has heard, but because he cannot associate corruption with Mary. He says that Christ God 'clothed her with the incorruptibility of his own body, and glorified her with incomparable glory'. Again, he calls her a human tabernacle, 'raised and established by Him (Christ) on the foundation of the incorruptibility of his own body, to be with him for ever and ever and serve us Christians with her powerful protection, assuring our salvation by her help'.

#### SOME AGNOSTICISM IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

In the following two centuries, the eighth and ninth, doubts began to arise in the West about whether the bodily Assumption was necessarily implied in the feast. This was not because of any rival tradition, but

because the old apocryphal story, with all its appearance of legend, had recently been translated into Latin and found its way into the West. The fact that it had been rejected by the Church as untrustworthy gave encouragement to the agnostics. Was it not safer to reject the original truth around which the legend was woven? It was rather like the position of someone who rejected the existence of Gautama Buddha because so many legends about him arose later. The leader of the agnostics was Paschasius Radbert, who forged a letter and imposed it on to the name of St Jerome, and came to be known as the Pseudo-Jerome. The Church showed her broadmindedness by including the Pseudo-Jerome, with all his scepticism, in the first six lessons of the Office of the Assumption for about six centuries. But she showed her guidance by the Spirit in eventually rejecting the view there expressed and accepting that of Radbert's rival, an unknown writer now known as the Pseudo-Augustine,<sup>1</sup> who defended the assumption so vigorously as to convince Christendom.

#### HISTORY

Non-Catholics often ask us for historical evidence. If they mean by this eye-witness accounts by human beings, we neither have such nor have ever looked for them. We have no such accounts of the virgin birth, nor of our Lord's temptations, nor of most of the agony in the garden, nor have we witnesses which would satisfy historians for many of the events of our Lord's life. Obviously we have none for the Immaculate Conception. And, if we did have eye-witnesses, that would not make it part of the Christian faith. It is not a question of profane history, but of doctrine—though we know by revelation that it did take place.

#### TRADITION

Perhaps non-Catholics are asking for what we call Tradition, evidence that early Christians held it. We certainly have traditional witness for nearly all I have said so far as far back as the second century, i.e. that Mary was a second Eve, a new beginning, a Mother of Life, characterized by virtue and faith instead of faithlessness and disobedience; as also the doctrine that death and corruption are against God's original design, and only came as a result of sin. Death of the innocent can help to overcome sin; corruption in the grave cannot. The only tradition we can be certain of as *explicitly* passed on to the first generation is the tradition that Mary was different. Just as Martha knew that Christ would rise, the first generations might have known that His mother would.

There is of course a great deal of unofficial evidence that Christians thought our Lady's end miraculously unusual even to the extent of

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Ratramnus. Another writer, on the other side, perhaps Autpertus, became confused with St Augustine, and is sometimes referred to as Pseudo-Augustine.

bodily Assumption. This is reflected in the apocryphal writings.<sup>1</sup> These legends—for legends they undoubtedly are—arose in orthodox Christian circles, and were invented obviously because Christians felt that Mary's privileges demanded it. They did not agree however: some said she was martyred; others that she died a normal death. Some said that after death her body remained incorrupt; others that it rose again and was united to her soul.

#### FOURTH AND FIFTH CENTURIES

In the fourth century St Epiphanius thinks it possible—even probable—that our Lady did not die. He suggests that Scripture is silent for fear of startling us by this extraordinary miracle. St Ambrose in the same century pictures her standing at the foot of the cross desiring to die with her son, and rejoicing because she knew she would share his resurrection. She here is shown as having faith in two events which had not yet occurred; her Son's resurrection and her own. 'Did she not rather desire to die at the same time as her Son? In this case, she leaped for joy, at the thought of rising up with him, being well instructed in the mystery, knowing that she was Mother of him who was to rise again. Knowing also that the death of her Son was a sacrifice for the common good, she was ready to associate herself by her death, and if necessary, add something to the work of the world's salvation' (De inst. Virg. vii, 49).

Timothy of Jerusalem, in a work many think to have been written in the fifth century, says the Virgin 'blameless and in all things holy, remains immortal even till now through Him who had His habitation in her, who carrying her into the place of the assumption, took her across'. This seems to imply a view that she did not die at all.

St Ambrose and others say that Christ alone rose from the dead. Does this contradict our interpretation of his passage? When we find elsewhere that he speaks of many people rising from the dead at the time of Christ's death, we realize that, in saying Christ alone rose from the dead, he must mean that Christ was the only one to rise from the dead by his own power.

It was not till the fifth century, with the establishment against all heresies of Catholic doctrine regarding Christ that theologians began to work out the theology involved in Mary's position. Obviously it would have been meaningless to discuss the full significance and implications

<sup>1</sup> A question has been sent to SCRIPTURE as to the value of the apocryphal sources for the doctrine of the Assumption. They have no direct value. The Latin version was condemned in the Gelasian Decree, about the eighth century. Everyone admits that they are pure legends. They do not even agree in saying that our Lady was assumed. The fact that they all make our Lady's life end in miracle, and that some record her bodily assumption either to paradise or to heaven has an indirect value, as suggesting that many Christians of the time must have realized that the Assumption followed from her dignity and position.

of divine motherhood, until the Godhead of her Son was sufficiently understood. So it is really only from the fifth century onwards that any systematic doctrine of our Lady, over and above what had been done in the second century, began.

#### THE FEAST AND LATER GREEK FATHERS

The feast of the Assumption seems to go back to that time, though it was not officially established in the empire until the end of the sixth century. The earlier date is strongly suggested by the fact that the Ethiopians, Nestorians and Armenians who broke away from the Church about that time still keep the feast on the same date as we do. They never called it the feast of our Lady's death, but always by a special name, such as her *Falling Asleep*, her *Passing Over*, or her *Assumption*. Many think it was first celebrated at Ephesus on the occasion of the declaration that she was Mother of God, and it is probable that the first church of the Falling Asleep was in Jerusalem, a church to which the Emperor gave great gifts about this time. Pius XII in his encyclical for the definition refers to the evidence from the early liturgical books. The Gregorian Sacramentary (sixth-seventh century) says that, though Mary died a temporal death, she could not be held by the bonds of death. The Gallican Sacramentary (at least before the eighth century) calls the Assumption a singular privilege. The Byzantine Liturgy says explicitly that she preserved her body incorrupt in the grave, and glorified it when taken up to God.

St Gregory of Tours mentions the bodily assumption in the sixth century, though he gives no theological arguments for it. SS. Andrew of Crete, Germanus and John Damascene all preach on the feast, giving many theological reasons for their belief in the full bodily assumption. St John Damascene is usually regarded as the Father who summed up in his writings the whole of Greek theology; and few Fathers are held in greater respect. Three sermons of his on the bodily assumption have come down to us. In his second homily he writes: 'Just as the all-holy and incorruptible body that was born of her and hypostatically united to the Word rose from the tomb on the third day, so it was necessary that the Virgin should be snatched from the tomb that the Mother be reunited to her Son. Just as He had come down to her, so this beloved Mother was lifted up to a greater and more beautiful home, heaven itself. It was necessary that the Son who had been her guest in her womb, should be her host in His own tabernacles . . . It was necessary that she who had preserved her virginity intact in her childbearing should see her body protected from all corruption, even after death . . . It was necessary that she who had seen her Son on the cross and received into the depths of her heart the sword of sorrow which she had escaped when she became a mother should contemplate this Son sitting at the right hand of the Father.'

It was necessary that the Mother of God should enter into the possession of all her Son's property and be venerated by all creation as the Mother and Handmaid of God.'

In other parts of this booklet I have quoted from writers of the immediately succeeding centuries. After the ninth century, explicit defence of the Assumption becomes universal.

#### SCRIPTURE

What about Scripture? Clearly, Scripture is very much involved in the doctrinal arguments we began with. Some theologians think to find the dogma explicitly, though in a veiled manner, in the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse (Revelation), where there is a woman enthroned in heaven who brought forth a man-child whom the dragon is determined to destroy. Newman was always impressed by the fact that in the first book of the Bible and in the last, we find a woman, the devil and a child. The woman and child are in both cases in opposition to the devil. In both cases the child is victorious.

St John is the only writer of the New Testament who, according to tradition is likely to have lived long enough to record any details about Mary's death. It is only in the Apocalypse that he would be likely to do so. We find in this revelation three women; two of them are good and are in opposition to the devil, and at peace with Christ; the remaining one is the scarlet woman who is in league with the forces of evil and in opposition to Christ. The scarlet woman is in deadly opposition to the Church, to all that is good, and therefore to Mary, who is sinless. For the scarlet woman is accused of all manner of vice, she rides on a scarlet beast (representing luxury), scrawled all over with blasphemy, and she is drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore witness to Jesus. The beast is dead at the time John writes, and is to be followed by ten kings. In this chapter, St John represents the persecuting Roman empire, which was so full of luxury and vice, which was drunk with the blood of Christians. The ten kings which follow represent other kings who would follow the Roman empire in persecuting the Lamb and His faithful. They will destroy the scarlet woman, but will hand over their dominion to the beast and still be enemies of the Lamb.

How different is the woman of chapter xii, who is pictured first as seen in the sky in glory about to bring forth her man-child. The dragon (the devil) is also pictured as waiting to devour the man-child. The man-child, shown as the good shepherd, and in the messianic terms of Psalm ii, 9, is clearly Christ. He is taken up by God out of the clutches of the dragon. St John then pictures the previous struggle between the devil and the forces of good, which had led to the devil's being cast out of heaven, and to his malice against Christ's followers on earth. In verse 13, he is shown as going in pursuit of the woman, now that the man-child

has been taken up away from him (by his resurrection and ascension). The woman is taken away into a place of refuge on the wings of the great eagle, which represents God, Yahweh (Cf. Dt. xxxii, 11). This seems to mean the assumption of the Blessed Virgin. Finally, the devil is pictured as going in pursuit of Mary's children, in the final verses. The Woman of this chapter has often been taken for the Church, but it fits better the Virgin Mother of sorrows, who suffered with Christ to bring Him forth in the hearts of us all and who, after she has been taken away, still leaves us, her children, to struggle against the evil one.

This prophecy, like the rest of these chapters, refers principally to the future but, in explaining the future, it refers back to certain events (Christ's birth, ascension, Mary's assumption) which bear upon the future.

So much for what I personally regard as probably an explicit reference to Mary's assumption.

People have objected that Christ says in Jo. iii, 13 : 'No man has ever gone up to heaven ; but there is one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man, who dwells in heaven'. This does not bear on the question, for here Christ is not denying the resurrection of the body, but is asserting that he alone was able to reveal the Father, since he alone was in the Father's bosom. Jo. xiii, 36, has been quoted, 'I am going where thou canst not follow me', but our Lord adds the words : 'But thou shalt follow me afterwards'.

#### OPPORTUNENESS

Many people ask : Why was this doctrine defined precisely at this time ? Surely any time is opportune if the doctrine is part of revelation. Perhaps the questioner means : Why was it not defined sooner ? I suppose the answer to that is that it was not seen with complete conviction until the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception had been defined. After that had been done, it was only a matter of time ; and the necessary study and preparation could hardly have been completed in much less than a century.

Pius XII gives the following reasons for responding to the appeal of the Catholic world to-day. First it will increase the glory of the Trinity, with whom Mary is so closely associated. Secondly, one may hope that it will inspire all who call themselves Christians to increase in their love of Mary and their desire to join the Mystical Body of Christ, of which she is the Mother. Lastly, one may hope that men will gain an increased realization of the value of human life, when dedicated to the Father's will and the good of mankind.

I will end with words of a seventh century writer : 'As she is a woman, so she is queen and Lady and Mother of God . . . She rose again, not indeed in a purely spiritual manner as it were without flesh and body, but clothed about in her most holy body with incorruption and immortality . . .' (Pseudo-Athanasius).

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