

## ASSUMPTION OF MARY (August 15, 2021)

We take a break today from the Sundays of Ordinary Time to celebrate one of the great Marian feasts—the Assumption of Mary into heaven. Vatican II gives us the basics: “Finally the Immaculate Virgin...when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory.” Pope Pius XII formally defined this as a dogma of the Catholic faith rather recently in 1950, but only after more than 1000 years of growing understanding, reflection, and celebration of this belief. This is a great example of what we call Sacred Tradition in action: the Holy Spirit guiding the Church to an ever deeper understanding of divine truth—just as Jesus promised the apostles at the Last Supper.

One other brief point to begin with: this feast of Mary’s Assumption into heaven is related to Jesus’ Ascension into heaven, body and soul, after his resurrection from the dead. But we need to make an important distinction. Jesus ascended body and soul into heaven on his own power as God the Son, risen from the dead. His mother Mary, on the other hand, was assumed into heaven—body and soul together-- by the power of God. Mary, though sinless from conception, was and is not divine in any way. Thus, she could not ascend into heaven on her own power in the way that Jesus, her divine Son, did.

The Church has always taught and spoken about Mary with great love and devotion in many ways—e.g. her Immaculate Conception, her title as Mother of God (because she is the mother of Jesus who is God the Son), and her Assumption into heaven. But none of this means that we put Mary on some kind of ‘equal footing’ with God in any way. This is important to affirm because there are many who are under the mistaken impression that we Catholics do so. No—everything we believe about Mary and her unique gifts are precisely that: they are gifts of God. Mary’s Magnificat—her prayer of praise in today’s gospel—expresses this so well:

- “...my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Mary has a Savior like everyone else. God saved her, preserved her from sin in a unique way, to be sure—but God indeed is her Savior.
- “From this day all generations will call me blessed.” Indeed she is called ‘blessed’, and has been for 2000 years. Mary wasn’t bragging here in any way; she was simply telling the truth that all generations would know and rejoice in her being blessed by God.
- “...the Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his Name.” Notice how clearly and humbly Mary acknowledges that it is God who has done all these things for her; she didn’t do them herself because she had no power to do so herself.

But this feast, important as it surely is for what it declares about God did for Mary at the end of her life on earth, is also of major importance for every one of us as well. Let’s keep in mind here a basic, ground-level truth about the human person: every single one of us is a combination of body (our flesh-and-blood material being) and soul (the spiritual component that makes us aware of who and what we are and the freedom we have to live as God calls us to live). God made us and fashioned us in his image and likeness, and he chose to give us a bodily, flesh-and-blood form and existence as well. And he made us as body and soul to live forever in perfect joy with him in heaven.

Human sin, of course, threw a sort of monkey wrench into that divine plan. But then God in his infinite and mysterious wisdom and love gave us his Son, the eternal Word, to take on our human, flesh-and-blood life, our body-and-soul existence...and he did so through Mary. Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension to heaven meant that his whole Person with both its divine and human natures is in his and our Father's kingdom. Mary's Assumption means that she also shares in that kingdom in the fullness of her being—body and soul together. And where Jesus and his Mother are, we hope to be when our bodies are raised from the dead on the last day in the fullness of our human nature—flesh and blood, body and soul, our whole personhood. The Catechism says it well in referring to Mary's Assumption as “an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians” (n. 966).

That's why our Catholic faith takes the human body so seriously, why it is to be respected and protected as it has been given to us by God. It is why, for example, we defend without apology and with firm conviction the right to life for the unborn child, the terminally ill, the disabled and every other human being without exception. It is also why we are not free to attempt to reshape or reconstruct the body into something it is not and cannot be. We are to be grateful stewards of the life and the bodily existence we have each received from God.

In other words, our bodies matter: God made them and entrusted them to us. We are called to live out our body/soul lives on this earth in accord with the truth of God's plan and design; and we do this to prepare for our body/soul lives in eternity. One of the columnists in the current issue of *Our Sunday Visitor* said it well: “God has chosen to redeem us, save us, renew us through our bodies...This body, my body..., is meant to be taken up by the marvelous power of the triune God.” The Blessed Virgin Mary now and forever enjoys that heavenly presence in the fullness of her being—human body and soul together and inseparable. Holy Mother of God, gloriously assumed into heaven, pray for us that we may join you in the fullness of our being in the eternal love and joy of your Son with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.