

“JESUS’ ASCENSION – MARY’S ASSUMPTION”

A REFLECTION ON THE ASSUMPTION OF OUR LADY

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During 41 years in the priesthood, I have often been asked by those either new to the catholic Faith or simply inquisitive: “What is the difference between the Ascension of Jesus and the Assumption of Mary? And how is the Assumption of Mary life-changing?” Or, more simply stated: “Why should I even care one way or the other?” My first response might be: “One can only properly understand the Assumption of Mary in light of the Ascension of Christ.”

After Jesus’ crucifixion, it was in the power of God, who raised Jesus from the grave, that the resurrection became a reality. The New Testament writers continually attest to this. In the Acts of the Apostles, on that first Pentecost day Peter proclaimed to the crowd, “... God raised [Jesus] up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for Him to be held by it” (Acts 2:24). St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans, “We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). The New Testament writers are all very clear on this one point, that through the divine love God the Father raised His Son from death and the grave.

This resulted in Jesus having a new and glorious resurrected body, not merely a spiritual body. His resurrected body could pass through closed doors (John 20:19-20). During the breaking of the bread in the home of Cleopas, the resurrected body of Jesus vanished from their midst (Luke 24:31). In another resurrection appearance, in the presence of the disciples, Luke records that the risen Lord ate a piece of broiled fish (Luke 24:42-43). Jesus’ resurrected body could be touched and held. Jesus says to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing” (John 20:27). The resurrected body of Jesus could now no longer be confined to this earthly world. It was no longer subject to the Laws of Physics. So, in the Ascension, Jesus who was of the same substance of the Father, returned to Heaven by His own power.

But unlike Jesus’ glorious Ascension, Mary’s Assumption was not possible through any power of her own. Our Blessed Lady’s Assumption could only take place by the will and divine act of love of the God. Since Mary had found “favor with God” (Luke 1:28), and since she accepted God’s call to bear his Son, the Church understands her as the first Christian disciple. Therefore, why should it be so difficult to believe that, through her Son, she should be the first to receive the gift of resurrected life? And why not! Her answer to God was so eloquent in its simplicity, “...let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). The promise of Christ to the faithful is that through His death and resurrection, we too may receive the hope of victory over death.

At the end of her earthly life, did Mary herself undergo death, or was she spared death by God, being assumed directly into heaven? Interestingly, the Church in the West has never pronounced definitively on the question. The Catechism... does not directly indicate whether she died, or whether she was spared death (Part 1: Section 2, no. 964). St. John Paul II said, “The Mother is not superior to the Son who underwent death, giving it a new meaning and changing it into a

means of salvation.” Nonetheless, in her heavenly Assumption, Mary was spared from bodily corruption.

On the other hand, the Eastern Orthodox tradition refers to the final event at the end of Mary’s life as the Dormition. The Dormition of the Theotokos commemorates the death, resurrection after three days, and glorification of Christ’s mother. Belief in the Dormition professes that Mary, at the end of her life, “went to sleep” and was then taken up into glory into Heaven. St. Paul in many of his epistles refers to those who have died in the Lord as having “fallen asleep.” In his letter to the Church at Thessalonica, Paul writes, “But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). To the Church at Corinth Paul writes, “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (I Corinthians 15:20).

In the end, the Assumption/Dormition of Mary is one of the great divine acts of love given to us by our heavenly Father. St. John Paul II said, “the Assumption truly was an event of love, in which Mary’s ardent longing to be with her Son was finally fulfilled.”

What does Mary’s Assumption mean to us, the faithful? Simply this, through the Incarnation of her Divine Son, what was done for our Blessed Lady demonstrates the sure and certain hope now made possible for us. Dr. Edward Sri writes, “With whatever we’re facing in life, may we, like Mary, fall into the Father’s arms, so that we may have a more profound experience of his supporting us in our present sufferings and raising us to himself—both now and at the hour of our death.” (Edward Sri, The Assumption of Mary, Franciscan Spirit Blog.)