

The Assumption Of The Blessed Virgin Mary

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Pope Pius XII will be remembered in the history of theology for many things. One thinks offhand of his encyclical letters on the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, and on the sacred liturgy as the official worship of the Church. Theologians will ever be guided by his wise directives in the recent encyclical on sound theology, and biblical scholars will always be grateful to him for his encouragement of scientific scriptural studies. One remembers as well his decrees concerning the extraordinary minister of Confirmation; and the Apostolic Constitution which settled the age-old dispute about the essence of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

But the most important step of his pontificate is the announced definition of the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary's body into heaven. The prospective definition makes most timely a discussion of the meaning and history of the doctrine, the reasons which impel us to accept it, and the significance of the definition itself.

Meaning of the Assumption
An ultimate and authoritative definition of the expression "the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin" cannot be given by any individual save the Pope. Only when the Papal definition comes forth shall we know with exactitude what is contained in this prerogative of the Virgin Mother of God. In the strictest sense, the expression means no more than the glorious transferral of Mary's body, joined with its soul, to Heaven. Defined in this sense, the doctrine of the Assumption does not necessarily involve the death of Mary, or an anticipated resurrection. Most Catholics, however, take a larger view of the Assumption and in their mind the doctrine itself would imply (a) the death of Mary; (b) the miraculous preservation of her body from decay; (c) the reunion of her beatified soul with that body; (d) the glorification of the risen body; (e) the translation of it to the halls of Heaven.

We may expect that the Holy Father, in his forthcoming definition, will make official this larger concept, but there does remain the possibility that he will pass the question of Mary's death, and define only the Assumption in the strict sense.

History of the Assumption
The first literary reference to the Assumption, among documents now at our disposal, is contained in a semi-fictional work of the fifth century entitled "The Passing of Mary." In the early days of the Church many Christians not content with the biographical material of the New Testament composed many pieces of literature to fill in the gaps left by the inspired writers. These books are called the Christian "Apocrypha." Some of them deal with Our Lord, and give details about His infancy, sojourn in Egypt, and the hidden life at Nazareth. Other apocryphal works, composed about the beginning of the fifth century, purport to give biographical information

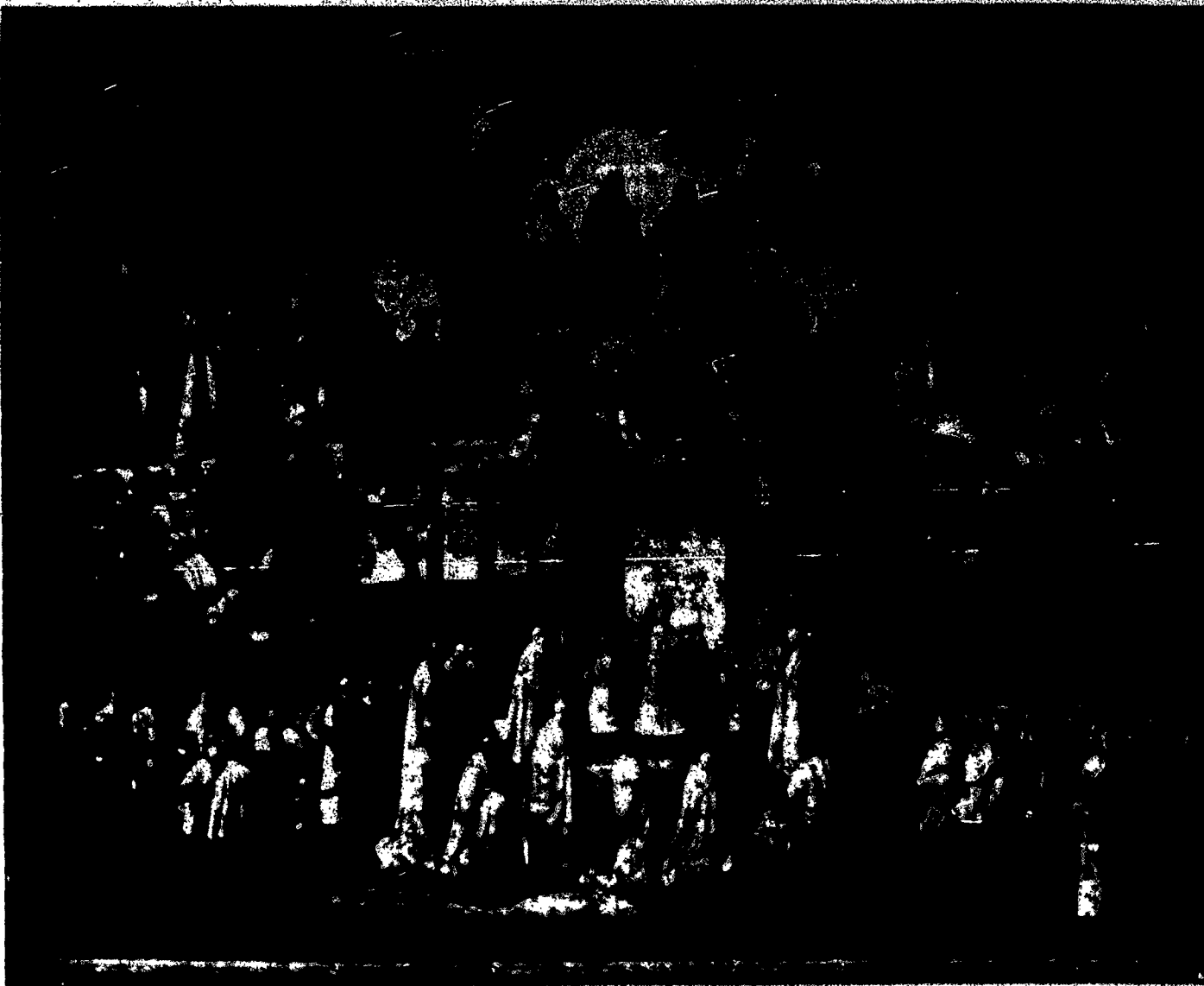
about Our Lady her nativity, marriage, and last days on earth.

All scholars are agreed that these apocryphal books are at least semi-fictional and that many of the events narrated therein originated solely with the imagination of the author. There does however seem to have been a solid core of historical fact around which the apocryphal writer strapped his layer of imaginative description, but the task of disentangling the truth from the fiction is, for a private scholar, a difficult one. And, in passing, it might be well to observe that in defining the Assumption as part of her faith the Church in no sense intends to affirm the historical truth of all the details contained in these narratives.

When we pass from the fifth century to the sixth, we find clear references to the doctrine in more respectable sources. A forerunner of the Roman Missal, the Sacramentary of Pope St. Gregory (590-604), contains a prayer for the feast of the Assumption which declares that "on this day, the Blessed Mother of God suffered temporal death, but it was not possible that she who gave birth to our incarnate Lord . . . should be subjugated by death." It should be noted that parts of the Sacramentary are older than the sixth century and that Assumption prayer may well be one of these.

About this same time, the Assumption was likewise being celebrated to the east and to the west of Rome. In the Orient the Emperor Maurice is said to have commanded that the feast be kept in accordance with western practice, on the fifteenth of August. And in Spain the Mozarabic liturgy speaks of Mary having been assumed into the choir of angels, and virgin after being girded by the gift of incorrupt flesh. And from the same century, the voice of St. Gregory of Tours is heard from Gau. The Lord commanded the holy body of Mary to be borne on a cloud to Paradise where reunited to his soul it enjoys the never-ending bliss of eternity.

Later Fathers and Theologians
As we come nearer our own



FROM AINING THE DOGMA: Pope Pius IX, proclaiming the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, 1854, is the subject of this painting by Francesco Podesti of Ancona (1808-1884). It is one of two frescoes by him in the Hall of the Immaculate Conception in the Vatican Galleries. The artist shows in the upper part of the painting—Paradise—with Our Lady in the place of honor. Six members of the United States hierarchy and two from Canada were present at the historic occasion in 1854. Many American Bishops will attend the Assumption Proclamation on Nov. 1.

times, the testimonies to the doctrine become more numerous. Such Oriental Fathers as St. Modestus of Jerusalem, St. John of Damascus, and St. Andrew of Crete have entire sermons dedicated to the Assumption. The insignificant opposition led by Casuar, a Parisian monk was never thought serious enough to merit refutation by the great medieval schoolmen.

While St. Thomas merely alludes to the Assumption in his monumental Summa, his commentary on the Angelic Salutation gives him an opportunity to express his own faith at some length. There he asserts that the Blessed Virgin was not subject to corruption, when she was assumed with her body into Heaven. We believe that after death she was raised and taken to Heaven.

As yet a son comes from the great theologians of modern times. Suarez taught that it would be rash to deny the doctrine. While Benedict XIV, writing as a private theologian before his elevation to the chair of Peter maintained that the doctrine was not an article of faith, he nevertheless noted that it would be extremely rash to oppose it. And subsequent theologians have all affirmed the doctrine, confining their disputations to the relative worth of arguments in its favor, and to the feasibility of defining it as an article of the Catholic faith.

It must be confessed that the silence of the first five centuries is embarrassing to us. But there is also another embarrassing silence, twenty centuries in duration, embarrassing to those who would deny the Assumption. I mean the complete non-existence of any claim to the possession of Mary's body. The inhabitants of Jerusalem and Ephesus have long quarrelled over the privilege of possessing Mary's empty grave; but no city has ever presumed to present itself as the possessor of her sacred body. This would seem to be a strong indication that the Christians of antiquity universally recognized that it was not upon the earth.

Theological Consideration
Many theologians, admitting the difficulties involved in an appeal to history, have recourse to theological reasoning. Their points of departure are predominantly two: Mary's immaculate Conception, and her divine maternity.

In the present order, we know from divine revelation that death and dissolution are inflicted by God solely as a penalty for Original Sin. So far as the body is concerned, we die and decay simply as a penalty for our share in Adam's fall. Now Mary had no share in Adam's fall, so part whatsoever in his guilt. From these two premises, it would seem to follow that neither could she have come under the ancient curse, "unto dust thou shalt return." If Mary was ever preserved from sin, the corruption of the soul, she should also have been preserved from the corruption of the body, the penalty inflicted by God for sin.

A yet stronger consideration is that derived from Mary's divine maternity. All Christians

believe that Mary is the Mother of God; that He, through her fiat became man. She is the mother of a devoted and omnipotent son. His devotion to her is shown at the beginning and at the end of His public life: at the beginning, when He performed His first miracle for her; and at the end, when even in His agony, He thought of her and committed her to the care of the disciple whom He loved. His omnipotence is shown by His ability to raise others and Himself from the dead.

Now with these facts in mind, let us see in what position the Christian who denies the Assumption is forced to place himself. He is forced to deny either the omnipotence of the filial devotion of Jesus. If, as a devoted son surely would, He willed to protect his mother from rot and decay, but did not so because of His inability, then He could not be omnipotent. If, on the other hand, He was able to do so, but unwilling, then He is lacking in filial devotion. Thus, to take from Mary the prerogative of her Assumption, involves logically the denial of either a divine or a human excellence in Jesus.

The mind of the devout Christian naturally rebels against the idea that Jesus was so thoughtless of the hands that fed Him, the lips that kissed Him, the arms that caressed Him, the womb that contained Him, and the breasts that nursed Him, so heedless and callous to the fate of the dear body of His mother that He left it to moulder, rot and decay in an unmarked grave. It is for this reason that one who has learned to love Jesus and Mary, cannot bring himself to a denial of Mary's Assumption.

Scripture and the Assumption
The theological reasonings just given are very strong, and, to my mind, are sufficient as a proof of the truth of the Assumption. It is, however, one thing to prove the Assumption to be a truth; and another thing to prove that it is a revealed truth. And, it should be remembered, before we can legitimately assent to any proposition with divine faith, we should first be morally certain that the proposition in question has been revealed by God.

Catholics know that there are two sources in which we can find those propositions which have been revealed by God for our acceptance. These sources are: the Sacred Scriptures; and the Living Tradition of the Church.

Many Catholic writers are convinced that the doctrine of the Assumption is at least implicitly contained in the written word of God.

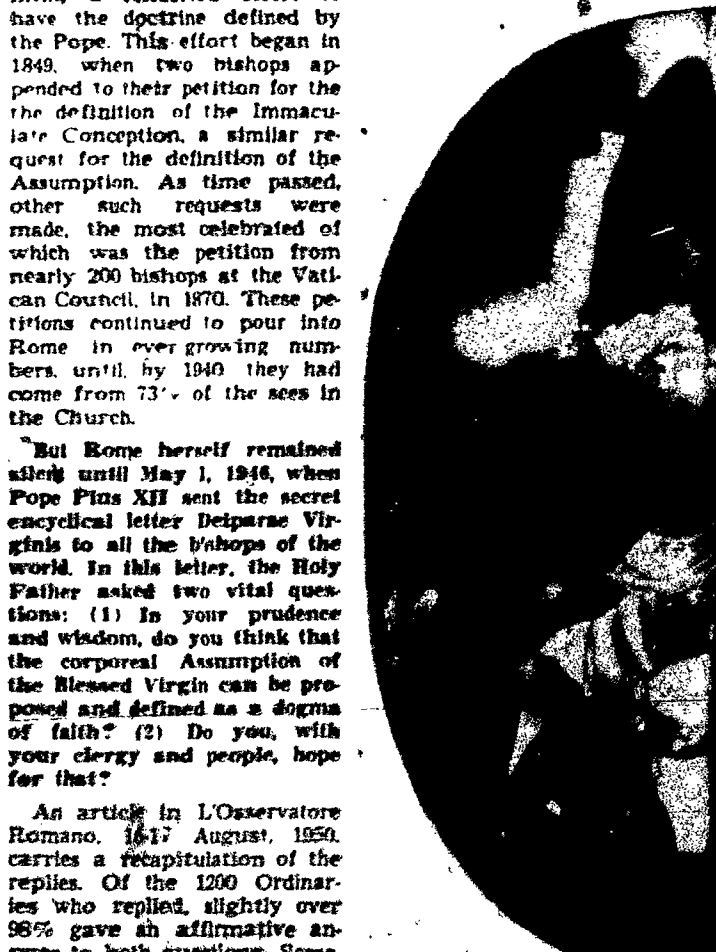
The first text offered is that of the Proto-gospel in Genesis, III, 15. Herein, after the victory of the serpent (Satan) over a man and a woman (God's first parents), God declares that He will place everlasting enmities between a certain woman and her seed on the one hand, and the serpent and his seed on the other; and that

the woman shall bruise the serpent's head, and the serpent shall bruise her heel.

Some of our Lord's early disciples were women. It is not unlikely that some of these women were the first converts to Christianity. It is not unlikely that some of these women were the first converts to Christianity. It is not unlikely that some of these women were the first converts to Christianity.



MARY'S ASSUMPTION: This attractive engraving by an unidentified artist depicts the Assumption of Our Blessed Mother. It is from an old Franciscan Missal, printed by Plantin at Antwerp in 1782. The Missal is in the rare book collection of the Library of St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N. Y. (NCWC)



IN WASHINGTON: Among the paintings of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, in the Capital City of the United States, is this one by Paolo Veronese, of the Venetian school. It hangs in the Kress Collection of the National Gallery of Art. (NCWC)

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