

COLUMNISTS

Assumption dogma evolved over centuries

Great portions of the universal church, both East and West, annually celebrate the feast of the Assumption of Mary into heaven on Aug. 15. Although the feast is relatively ancient in origin, the dogma was not formally proclaimed by the Catholic Church until Pope Pius XII did so in 1950.

The definition holds that, "when the course of her earthly life was finished," the Blessed Virgin Mary "was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven." It does not take a position on the question of whether Mary actually died.

There are a number of ancient texts from the late fourth century onwards that purport to record the death of Mary in Jerusalem amid various miraculous circumstances. When the death occurred is another matter. Some sources indicate that it was as early as three years after the death and resurrection of Christ; others place it 50 years after that.

Likewise, some sources claim that Mary's body was assumed into heaven while on its way to burial. Others assert that her body was raised after three days, just like her son's. An alternate belief held that she did not die at all, but was assumed directly into heaven. Catholic teaching leaves the question open.

However, feasts celebrating the death



essays in
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

of Mary were observed in Palestine during the fifth century, and possibly as early as the fourth century in Antioch. In Rome, there was no separate feast day for the Assumption until the late seventh century. Previously, there had been one general feast in honor of Mary celebrated on Jan. 1. That ancient tradition was restored in 1970 when Pope Paul VI decreed that the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, should be celebrated on the first day of the year, replacing the feast of the Circumcision of Jesus.

By the end of the eighth century the feast of the Assumption was universally observed in the West on Aug. 15, and in 863 Pope Nicholas I raised it to the liturgical level of Easter, Christmas and Pentecost. In various parts of the East, a separate feast of the Assumption was

celebrated either on Jan. 18 (in association with the Epiphany) or Aug. 15 (probably in connection with the dedication of a church in Mary's honor).

Popular belief in the Assumption had been developing in the early centuries mainly through preaching and various devotional practices. Preachers insisted that, given Mary's sublime dignity as the Mother of God, her body could not have undergone the corruption of the tomb after death. Others made the same argument against her having died at all.

It was inconceivable, medieval writers declared, that the very same flesh that gave birth to the Savior should be "consumed by worms." In the Scholastic theology of the period, this argument was known as the argument from convenience: God could preserve Mary from corruption; it was fitting that God should have done so; therefore, God did.

In proclaiming the dogma of the Assumption, Pope Pius XII intended to send a message to a world newly emerging from the horrors of the Second World War. His pronouncement deplored the destruction of life, the desecration of the human body and the prevalence of moral corruption.

He pointed to Mary's Assumption as "the exalted destiny of both our soul and

body." It proclaims the ultimate victory of God's grace over sin, and underscores the impact of that grace on the material world as well as the spiritual. Her victory gives strength to our own faith and hope in the resurrection of the body.

The Second Vatican Council would make the same point more than a decade later in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: "...the Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is the image and beginning of the church as it is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise, she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of God" (n., 68).

The theologian Sister Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, effectively situates the dogma of the Assumption in historical context: "Amid the constant hostility of history, the narrative power of *this dogma* reminds the Church of the undaunted power of this woman, free in her love for God and others through the power of grace..."

The dogma of the Assumption, she wrote, "can be professed as prophecy in the midst of the history of suffering."

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

As Queen-Mother, Mary shares in Christ's kingdom

Assumption (Aug. 15): (R3) Luke 1:39-56. (R1) Revelation 11:19a-12:1-6a, 10ab. (R2) 1 Corinthians 15:20-26.

Doris Day was once asked what kept her looking so young. It was not her expensive face creams, she answered, nor 14 hours of rest at night. She said it was the thoughts she thought. "If you think an ugly thought, you'll look ugly."

Once young Jelena of Medjugorje asked the Mother of God why she was so beautiful. Our Lady reportedly answered, "It is because of love. If you love, you too will become beautiful."

The great ages of faith were filled with joy and merriment, filled with golden lights and blue colors, like Giotto's frescoes. This was so because those ages eagerly turned their attention to all that was true and good and beautiful in man rather than to the seamy side of life. In these discouraging and depressing days, the church urges us to think of Mary. Thoughts of her will beget hope, will bring joy back to a joyless society. Think of Mary's Assumption. What a happy-ending story it tells. One, like us, broke the hands throttling man: evil and death. What happened to her, God means to happen to us.

Graphically, John portrayed evil in the



a word
for
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

world as a huge dragon, flaming red (R1). He pictured the beast confronting beauty. The beautiful woman was the Mother of the Messiah. But she also symbolizes the church, the community where the Messiah dwells and is found. Draconian evil has nothing in either one of them. The Mother is immaculately conceived, full of grace; the church is Holy Mother Church, Christ's bride.

The second reading from St. Paul is excerpted from the great chapter expounding his doctrine of the resurrection. As Christ rose from the dead, body and soul, so did his mother. That is what the Assumption means. For Mary, death was "but the blinking of an eyelid which does not interrupt vision."

Sin, the greatest evil, and decomposi-

tion, the great evil of death — both were warded off from Mary. So she sang: "God ... has done great things for me." The scriptural basis for the great things done for Mary — for her Immaculate Conception and her Assumption — can be found in Elizabeth's greeting to Mary. "Who am I," asked Elizabeth, "that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

In Old Testament history during the period of the monarchy, mothers played a decisive role. For in the age of the harem, the throne went to the son whose mother had proved the most resourceful and had outmaneuvered all the other wives of the king. For instance, Bathsheba secured the throne of David for her son Solomon, despite the rights of his older brother, Adonijah. Solomon owed everything to his mother. Thus Solomon made a throne for her next to his own. From being one of many wives, Bathsheba became the power behind the throne — the Queen-Mother! All the king's power and prestige were hers. She wore a crown like the king's, sat at his right hand, shared the glory of his kingship.

When St. Luke puts the title "Mother of my Lord" into Elizabeth's mouth, he was reflecting the devotion of the early church to Mary. He was saying that the

early church considered Mary like the Queen-Mother, like the mothers of the kings of Israel. As Queen-Mother, she shares in a unique way the blessings of his kingdom. His kingdom is one of incorruption — one characterized by victory over evil and death. Surely, then, the Queen-Mother must share in such a victory.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, August 16
Judges 2:11-19; Matthew 19:16-22

Tuesday, August 17
Judges 6:11-24; Matthew 19:23-30

Wednesday, August 18
Judges 9:6-15; Matthew 20:1-16

Thursday, August 19
Judges 11:29-39; Matthew 22:1-14

Friday, August 20
Ruth 1:1, 3-6, 14-16, 22;
Matthew 22:34-40

Saturday, August 21
Ruth 2:1-3, 8-11; 4:13-17;
Matthew 23:1-12

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