

THE ASSUMPTION:

A Dogma and Its Critics

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“Having repeatedly raised to God prayers of urgent supplication, and having invoked the light of the Spirit of Truth: to the glory of Almighty God, Who has bestowed His signal favours on Mary; in honour of His Son, the Immortal King of the Ages, the Conqueror of sin and death; to the increase of the glory of the same August Mother; and to the joy and exultation of the Whole Church: by the authority of Our Lord Jesus Christ, by that of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by Our own Authority, We pronounce, declare and define the dogma to be divinely revealed; that the Immaculate Mother of God, the Ever-Virgin Mary, was, on the completion of her earthly life, assumed body and soul into the glory of Heaven.”

Such was the solemn utterance by which the Vicar of Christ, our Holy Father Pope Pius XII, defined the dogma of the Assumption from his throne in the Piazza of St. Peter’s in Rome, on the Feast of All Saints, 1950. The immense burst of cheering which volleyed across the square, and the golden hymn “Te Deum” which followed were echoed joyfully throughout the Catholic world, from whose hierarchies, clergy, theologians, religious orders and faithful layfolk, a long train of petitions seeking the solemn definition of Our Lady’s glory had flowed to the Holy See for over a century.

But while the faithful rejoiced, voices of criticism, unbelief and perplexity were raised both among Christian dissidents, and from the secular world of “modern thought.” Most of these protests and comments—many of which appeared in the daily press, both here and abroad, serve only to illustrate the prevailing lack of comprehension of the beliefs and practices of the Church, especially in the English-speaking world. The most important objections may be summed up briefly as follows:

- (1) Protestant leaders generally declared that the doctrine was nowhere to be found in Scripture, and could not therefore be held to be part of the “Deposit of Faith.” Most of them regarded the belief of the Church as based on legendary stories of comparatively late date, and insisted upon the absence of any clear reference to it in the first five centuries of Christianity.
- (2) Others — High Church Anglicans or “Orthodox Eastern” dissidents— believed in the fact of the Assumption, but could not see how it could well be defined as a dogma; one reason being that the “deposit of faith” taught by the Apostles, which is the basis of doctrinal development, was in existence and being taught long before Our Lady died.
- (3) One of the commonest attitudes was that of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, who complained that by creating a pious belief into a compulsory “new dogma for Catholics, the Pope had widened the divisions of the Christian world for no sound reason.
- (4) Finally, a number of modern-minded humanists pointed out, courteously, that this sort of “challenge” to the modern mind tended to emphasize the remoteness of the Catholic outlook from the realities of our time, and to alienate liberal sympathies just at the moment when “men of goodwill” were disposed to rally to the Church as a bastion of civilized values and the personal dignity of man.

In the past, doctrines were usually defined as the result of a controversy which the Holy See, or a General Council, was called upon to decide. But this doctrine of the Assumption, paradoxically enough, aroused little, either of attack or attention, until the question of its public definition arose. Even at the time of the English Reformation—when the practice of honouring the Mother of God was attacked as Protestant theology developed—the traditional Catholic beliefs about the life and death of Mary were not subjected to any considerable criticism. The Feast of the Assumption—made a public holiday in England in the days of King Alfred—still appears in an Anglican Calendar in a 1562 edition of Cranmer’s Bible: and those for whom that Bible was printed would, one supposes, have been surprised to learn that the doctrine was “alienating” those who accepted the Protestant teaching from the Holy See! Indeed, an article published recently in the

Vatican journal “Osservatore Romano” cited a long line of references to the Assumption by Anglican poets and divines—and verses honouring the doctrine can even be discovered in such unexpected quarters as the works of Longfellow and Oliver Wendell Holmes!

THE RESURRECTION OF THE FLESH

I think the best way to enter upon the task of vindicating the definition against these varied objections is to set the doctrine itself forth more clearly against the background of Christian thought about man’s immortality, and then to show how it has developed through a deeper understanding of Mary’s place in the work of Redemption.

The Church believes that the Virgin body of Our Lady was divinely preserved from the natural process of dissolution at her death, just as her Divine Son’s had been: and that it is now lifted up into Heaven—just as the Risen Body of Our Lord’s was at the Ascension—being glorified with her pure soul in the full enjoyment of the Vision of God. To make this teaching more intelligible, let us recall the Church’s teaching on the subject of the “Resurrection of the Body,” which is asserted as a dogma in the eleventh article of the “Apostles Creed.”

Man was created by God as a “composite being” consisting of a body and soul: and the perfection of humanity consists in the rationally ordered harmony of these two essential elements, crowned and made complete by the supernatural life of Grace. In virtue of this “life above nature” our first parents were capable of a higher and holier relationship with God than would have been possible to them through the ordinary endowments of their nature. They were also exempted, by its possession from the natural law of physical death—the separation of the soul from the body, and the return of the latter, by corruption, to the dust. Had they remained obedient, Adam and Eve would have been uplifted, after a period of earthly life, into the glory of the Divine Vision.

This design was frustrated by the “great refusal” of Eden, the disobedience which led to the fall. Thereafter, man became subject to the natural destiny of all animal life as regards his body: it was doomed to perish. The human soul, deprived of grace, had become incapable of entering into the joy of Heaven: and the revolt had introduced war into the very inmost part of human nature, body warring against spirit, spirit torn by conflict in its own powers.

The task undertaken by the Incarnate Son of God, the “Second Adam,” was that of undoing this ruin—not in part, as regards the immortal soul only, but *wholly*; so that those adhering to this new race” by the new birth of baptism might regain, ultimately, the integrity of glorified human nature. Indeed, for these faithful “elect” Jesus Christ has in store a destiny far more splendid than that forfeited by Adam and Eve. They are to possess the beauty and vitality made manifest, prophetically, in the Transfiguration of Our Lord on Mount Thabor, and to share in the mysterious powers and agility of His Risen Body. “There are bodies that belong to earth,” says St. Paul, “and bodies that belong to Heaven and heavenly bodies have one kind of beauty, earthly bodies another.. .So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown corruptible rises incorruptible, what is sown unhonoured arises in glory, what is sown in weakness is raised in power: what is sown a natural body rises a spiritual body. If there is such a thing as a natural body, there must be a spiritual body, too. Mankind begins with the Adam who became—as Scripture tells us—a living soul: it is fulfilled in the Adam who has become a life giving Spirit.” (1 Cor. XV. 40, 42-45)

This fulfilment awaits all the faithful children of God: but for the general body, the consummation is delayed. They must follow the steps of the Redeemer and embrace His Cross, so that the pattern of His fruitful suffering may be reproduced in the Church, His Mystical Body. And they must submit to death, and the corruption of the flesh which is the due wage of sin, before they can arise to the triumph of the Resurrection at the end of the ages.

WHY THE ASSUMPTION?

Catholics believe—as do Christians generally—that while Our Lord accepted the Passion and death of Calvary for OUR sins, the corruption of the flesh was unable to touch Him. Divine Innocence “Death could not *hold* him,” as St. Peter says—there was no reason why it should, and it was not fitting that it should. Christ’s appearances after his corporal resurrection showed forth this truth, as well as the Divine Power and Authority of the revelation given by Him to

mankind.

From the truths which I have outlined the process of thought which has culminated in the Doctrine of the Assumption is easy enough to follow. Mary, the Virgin of Judah, was predestined in the eternal plan to be the Mother of the Divine Redeemer. The second person of the Trinity was to take human flesh wholly from her body, by the Creative power of the Holy Spirit. This work was accomplished with her full consent: “be it done unto me according to thy word...” which undid the effects of the disobedience of Eve. Hence the traditional veneration accorded to Mary by the Church as the “Second Eve,” the supreme human sharer, by voluntary self-offering, in the work of our redemption. She is the Mother, not only of the Christ-Adam, the new Head of our race, but of “all the living,” those who become members of Christ in His Mystical Body.

The necessity of reconciling the taintless perfection required in the Mother of the Incarnate God, with the subjection of Mary to the universal law that “salvation comes through Jesus Christ” led to the formulation of the doctrine of the *Immaculate Conception*. The soul of the Virgin, it was taught, was saved from the least stain of original sin from the very instant of her Conception by the saving Divine power acting by way of prevention, even as her sacred body was held by miracle inviolate, even in the act of child-bearing. From these conclusions the thought of the Church moves with a kind of inevitability to that concerning the assumption of Our Lady’s Body into heaven. For, while it was fitting that the “Second Eve” should share through her mysterious “sword of suffering” in the expiation of the Second Adam, and follow in His footsteps through the Valley of death, it was clearly *not* fitting that the pure vessel which had borne the Divine Saviour, the flesh which was His Flesh, should undergo the degrading penalty of corruption in the grave. Hence a deep and growing conviction in the Church that the Body of Mary had been lifted incorrupt into Heaven with that of Her Son: “He has taken her to Himself” declares Modestus of Jerusalem, “as He alone knows.”

NOT FOUNDED ON LEGENDS

It is important to understand clearly that the truth of the Assumption, solemnly defined by the present Pope during the Holy Year which has just ended, is thus enshrined in the “deposit of faith” as a conclusion drawn from the Church’s teaching about Our Lord Himself and His relation with His Mother. It has nothing to do with any existing record about what happened at her death, for nothing of the kind exists which is of the least real historical worth. The classical account, set forth in the sixth century by St. Gregory of Tours, is almost certainly a pious legend: it tells of a gathering of the Apostolic band to the death bed of Mary, a vision of Our Lord receiving her soul in the company of Angels, and later, of a second appearance of Jesus, who commands her holy body to be borne on a cloud to Paradise. In later additions, St. Thomas plays a part which is palpably imagined as corresponding with his role in the Gospel account of the Resurrection. No official Church teaching could possibly be founded on a basis of this kind: indeed, even if the historical fact of the Assumption were as fully demonstrated as many wonders in the Church’s history, this would not make the doctrine “definable” if it were not linked with Mary’s position in the Divine plan, so that it is contained, by implication, in the deposit of Faith itself. It is worth noticing, by the way, that even the Gregorian legend and its developments contain no hint of any apparitions of Our Lady like those of Jesus Christ immediately after His Resurrection: and this gives a higher value to the tradition out of which the story has grown.

It is important that the non-Catholic inquirer should realize that in claiming the exceptional privilege of Bodily Assumption for the Mother of Christ we are not exalting her as superhuman, or making her a sort of intermediary “goddess.” She has simply *gone before us* into a state of glory to which all the faithful are eventually destined: we, too, shall be “assumed” bodily into Heaven at the general resurrection, when the work of death and physical corruption is reversed. It is, in a sense, a violent and unnatural condition that the human soul should be *discarnate*: for we were not created for an angelic, but for a *human* immortality. (Mr. C. S. Lewis has suggested cogently that the repugnance commonly felt by living people for both *corpses*’ and “ghosts” reflects our sense that this separation is an anomaly:) Our souls are “set towards” a body—they would always have been linked with a body if God had had His loving way with our race from the first. With Mary He always had His way, from first to last—so that it is difficult to see how her soul could

endure discarnate, even for a time, as ours must.

Actually, it does not seem quite certain whether Mary is unique in the privilege of bodily assumption. What of the patriarchs whose bodies—according to St. Matthew—were raised up and appeared in Jerusalem after the Resurrection? What of Enoch and Elias, of whom the Scriptures suggest, at least, that they were rapt bodily into Heaven? It was very commonly believed in ancient times that St. John the Evangelist was body and soul in Paradise: and the same surmise has been piously made concerning St. Joseph, the foster-father of Our Lord, of whom no relics have at any time been claimed to exist.

“It’s Not in the Bible....”

Let us return, now, to the objections against the doctrine made by Protestants of the more old-fashioned school. They still hold to the traditional Reformation doctrine that all the “deposit of Faith” is contained in the Bible—not including certain “deutero-canonical” books which they reject. Its truths are to be drawn from the sacred books by devout souls enlightened by the Holy Spirit. All religious doctrine, therefore, if it is to be acceptable to them, should in theory be justified by reference to the text of Scripture: and where—as in the case of the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, Purgatory, the Veneration of saints and so forth—they fail to find a Biblical foundation for the Catholic teaching, they reject it out of hand as a corrupt or unfounded “accretion.”

As a description of the belief of the early Church concerning the foundations of the Faith, this is historically inaccurate. The organized Church itself existed long before the books which form our New Testament were assembled. There is no book in the New Testament itself which does not imply that it was written for people already instructed in the truth. This is noticed by the eminent Anglican scholar, Dr. B. J. Kidd, who goes on to say that “the Christian Church might conceivably have gone on for ever without Christian Scripture.” The Gospel was received by the Apostles from the mouth of Jesus Christ, Who left no writings of His own at all: and they were promised that the Holy Spirit would “guide them into all truth.” Part of this truth was ultimately committed to writing under Divine inspiration, to be added as a new “source book” to the ancient sacred books of the Jews, which contain records of the earlier Divine Revelation and the promise of the Messiah. The Church had the charge of these; as the Living Voice of the Holy Spirit, she had to guard, interpret and expound them in the light of the Divine Guidance given to her. *But the Bible is not, and never has been, held by orthodox Christian teaching to be the sole source of revealed truth.* There was also an oral tradition handed on by the Apostles to their successors, and later partly embodied in the writings of the Fathers and others.

The Development of Doctrine

The Scripture itself—constantly meditated upon by saints and sages—was the subject of interpretation under authority according to the rules of a theological science which “developed” its implications and drew new implications from its treasure house of wisdom, not *adding to*, but *deepening in perception* of the “truth once delivered to the saints.”

Catholics, therefore, believe in a “progressive” revelation—not in the sense that additional truth is given, unrelated to that which Jesus Christ originally imparted to His disciples, but in the sense that aspects of that revealed truth come to be perceived more clearly through persistent contemplation, and cast more light on human life. But if such activity is to be carried on by human minds, it is necessary that the truth should be guarded against distortion through false conclusions, and from eclipse in the confusion of unresolved disagreements. Hence *infallibility* is required, so that there may be an ordered movement of thought, not an unending muddle. For, while the errors of natural science may be cleared up, eventually, by being tested in the light of mundane experience, this cannot be done, here below, in the case of religious errors: for them, there is no earthly remedy unless the final teaching authority is an effective “organ of truth” guarded against error. That is why, outside Catholicism, a point has now been reached where “Christians” are hardly agreed upon a single point of the Christian revelation.

The Church and Our Lady

Having looked at the process of theological reasoning by which the Church has been guided to formulate and define the

dogma of the Assumption, it may be well, now, to examine the historical stages in which this development occurred. As I have already noticed, there is no inspired or historical record of the passing of Our Lady: and while St. John's Vision of the Woman in the Apocalypse is frequently identified with her in devout meditation, it may be doubted whether its symbolism originally referred to Mary. Similarly, passages of Scripture—both of the Old and New Testaments—are used by the Fathers and others to illustrate Marian theology: but none has been interpreted with authority as affording ground for the teaching concerning her heavenly exaltation.

The truth is that in the first five centuries of Christian history the Virgin Mother remains in comparative shadow—as she does in the New Testament itself. There is no account of her death, as we have seen, or of any visible miracle connected with it: the question of her sinlessness is not raised. Her figure appears only when reference to it is required in order to stress some aspect of Christian doctrine against those who challenge it. Thus, her true *Motherhood* is insisted upon against the deniers of her Son's Manhood: her *Virginity*, in the early creeds, in contradiction to those who might question His Godhead. St. Justin the Martyr (died c. 163) emphasizes Mary's status as the "second Eve" whose importance I have already shown: and he, with St. Irenaeus and Tertullian, began the process of accentuating her place in the work of redemption. But it was only when Nestorius' attempt to divide "Jesus the Man" from "Christ the God" had been condemned at the Council of Ephesus that the dignity of the Virgin of Nazareth came to be more fully recognized: and as "*Theotokos*"—*Mother of God*—she began to assume the Queenship over Catholic Christendom which was to be hers from henceforth.

The "Falling Asleep" of Mary

At the end of the fifth century the zeal aroused by the definition of Ephesus led to the utterances of the great Eastern teachers in which we find the embryo of the doctrines of the *Immaculate Conception* and the *Assumption*. The liturgical feast of the "Dormition" (falling asleep) of the Virgin begins to be observed generally in the sixth century: and the apocryphal stories connected with the death of Our Lady appear about the same time.

The quotation of a few eminent names may be of interest here. *St. Epiphanius* (late 4th and 5th century) argued warmly against heretics who denied Our Lady's perpetual virginity, and uttered the speculative view that it might well be that she had not died at all, but been carried up to Heaven like Elias. This view was seen to be unsound—for reasons which I have already discussed, connected with Mary's place in the work of redemption. Next we may mention an unknown writer whose works have been discovered among those of St. Augustine, who declares that he "shudders" at the thought "that the most sacred body, from which Christ assumed flesh . . . was given over to worms;" and concludes that it is "outside the possibilities of thought" in view of the privilege of her incomprehensible grace. According to St. John of Damascus, Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem told St. Pulcheria at the time of the Council of Chalcedon that Mary's sepulchre was known there, but that an "ancient and trustworthy tradition" existed that she was not there, having ascended into heaven—so that the Apostles, opening the tomb after her death, had found only grave clothes. The East Roman Emperor, Maurice, transferred the feast of the "falling asleep" or "transition" of Our Lady to the present date of the Assumption Feast, August 15, and it was observed on that date at Rome in the reign of St. Gregory the Great.

The "secret" prayer in the Gregorian missal belonging to this period seems to imply in its language a belief in the integral presence of Mary in Heaven. "*In accordance with the law of flesh, she has passed hence: yet are we aware that in heavenly glory she is interceding for us with Thee.*" For it would be superfluous for the Church to express with such emphasis the mere belief that the Blessed Virgin's *soul* was in Heaven, as though this were something extraordinary, instead of the common lot of the holy servants of God. It is worth noticing, too, that in this period, notable for relic-hunting and the veneration of holy relics—or what were held to be such, often on somewhat flimsy evidence—there is no sign of any appearance of physical relics of the Blessed Virgin, whether true or false, or of any effort to discover such. If they had regarded her sacred body as still on earth, this negligence—contrasting with the passionate interest in the remains of the Apostles, and other saints and martyrs of the heroic age, would be truly extraordinary.

Progress Towards the Definition

The history of the development of this particular dogma makes it clear that the theological process has nothing to do with the legendary tales about Our Lady current in the sixth century, which no Catholic theologian takes seriously. These are significant merely~ as providing dramatic expression of the current belief about the end of Our Lady's life—the deep conviction of the faithful that her passing was not like that of others. The liturgies of East and West, however, were purified eventually of these doubtful elements, and attention was concentrated on the glory of Our Lady in Heaven. The Assumption Feast became the occasion for homilies by such great preachers as St. Germanus of Constantinople, St. Andrew of Crete, and, above all, the heroic Eastern Catholic leaders in the Iconoclast controversy, St. John of Damascus, and St. Theodore Studita.

St. John tells his hearers of how “the Immaculate Virgin, defiled by no earthly passions, nourished by heavenly thoughts, went not back into dust, but, herself a living heaven, was gathered into the heavenly tabernacles.” “For,” he cries, “how could she taste death, from whom the true life flowed for all?” Yet, she bowed to the law laid down by Him to Whom she gave birth, and, as a child of the old Adam, underwent the old judgment—for, indeed, her Son, Who is the very Life, did not refuse it. Now, as the Mother of the Living God, she is fitly carried up to Him. Eve, who yielded to the serpent's tempting, was condemned to pain in child-bearing, received sentence of death, and was gathered into the inner chamber of the lower regions (i.e., Limbo). But that truly blessed one, ever attentive to God's Word, and filled with the operation of the Holy Spirit, conceived her Son without passion or human intercourse, at the spirit message of an Archangel, brought Him forth with no pain and consecrated herself utterly to God. How, then, was it possible for death to engulf her or the lower regions to receive her? How could corruption invade that body in which the Life was conceived? An even, straight, swift path to Heaven is prepared for her: for if Christ, the Truth and the Life, said “where I am, there will My servant be,” how much more will His Mother be with Him?

We see, here, summed up and rhetorically presented, the purely theological argument for the assumption which I have already set forth.

The Roman Church discouraged Assumption “Apocrypha” with its characteristic sobriety: and this even led some Western theologians to throw doubt, for a time, on the doctrine itself—especially as the West had come to be largely out of touch with Catholic developments in the Byzantine East. From the tenth century on, however, the position became clear in all its essentials, and the irrelevance of pseudo-historical detail was apparent. Thereafter, the doctrine of the Assumption was recognized, first as “a pious and religious belief,” then as “certain” and not to be denied without rashness; and so we pass to the modern age, when two hundred Bishops at the Vatican Council in 1870 requested that it might be made the subject of a dogmatic definition. Since then, the sense of the Church has endorsed their desire with increasing urgency, while the judgment of the Catholic episcopate was practically unanimous before the pronouncement of Pope Pius XII asserted the Assumption as a dogma of faith, in virtue of the teaching authority conferred upon him as the successor of St. Peter.

The Bull “Munificentissimus Deus”

In the Bull, *Munificentissimus Deus*, announcing and explaining the definition to the Christian world, it is important to notice the theological method employed by the Pope in treating of the doctrine. He starts, not by considering the Faith of the early Church, but that of our own times—especially that of the last century, since the definition of the Immaculate Conception. By this approach, he impresses upon us the truth that the Living Voice of the Church teaches God's truth with the same infallible authority today as at any time in the past, and it is to this Voice that all the faithful must listen, if they would learn it. It is not, therefore, in the beliefs of the early centuries—frequently implicit or only half-formulated—that we must look for enlightenment concerning the Church's present doctrine: on the contrary, it is the teaching of today which shows what has always been contained in the “Deposit of Faith.” The position is explained in the Encyclical, *Humani Generis*, which appeared only a short time before the Bull. Theologians, the Holy Father explains, must constantly have recourse to the fountains of Divine Revelation, so as to show how and where the teaching of the Living

Voice is found there, explicitly or implicitly. But this does not make theology simply one of the historical sciences. “Side by side with these hallowed sources, God has given His Church a living Voice; thus He would make clear to us, unravel for us, even what was left obscure in the deposit of Faith, and only present there implicitly.” The task of interpretation has not been entrusted to individuals— even theologians: this is the Church’s teaching, which must be decisive.

In the Bull, reference is made to the practical unanimity of the Catholic episcopate and faithful in holding the body Assumption of the Virgin to be definable—and this alone, it is declared, puts beyond question the fact of the Assumption as revealed by God, when it is considered that it is beyond human experience, so that it could not otherwise be known. It is only after this that the history of the doctrine in the Church is surveyed—in relation to the interpretation of Scripture, the liturgical tradition of East and West and the elucidations of the great Eastern Fathers, scholastics and later Catholic theologians.

THE MIND OF THE CHURCH UNANIMOUS

An accurate and clear picture of the Church’s mind on the Assumption doctrine during the past century has been preserved in a collection of the Petitions sent to the Papacy for its definition during the period between 1849 and 1940, published in two volumes by Fr. Rudolf de Moos, S.J., who has gathered them out of the archives with the collaboration of his colleagues. Spontaneous requests from the Hierarchy are 2,505 in number, from 73 per cent of the Church’s episcopal sees: and to them must be added those from Vicars Apostolic Abbots and Prelates, Superiors of religious orders, theological faculties and Seminaries. They come from a long series of National, Provincial, diocesan and regional councils, as well as from Marian Congresses and similar gatherings. When these volumes were published in 1945, the “Assumptionist Movement” revived with new vigour— a veritable tide of enthusiasm being shown in petitions from Bishops, religious superiors, theologians, clergy and the faithful at large. The Episcopates of entire nations and regions all over the world were now demanding the definition, as well as the pontifical and Catholic Universities: the orders and congregations were virtually unanimous. Hundreds of books, theses and articles concluded in its favour. Of especial interest are the figures for the Eastern “Uniate” Churches which preserve the ancient Catholic traditions of Eastern Christendom. When the final inquiries were made by the Holy See, fifty-three of fifty-four replies from the Hierarchies of these Churches were favourable. In 1946, finally the Catholic Hierarchy of England and Wales were unanimous *in* requesting the definition as opportune. Only six residential bishops in all the world, at the final stage, had doubts about whether the doctrine was part of Divine Revelation.

AN ANGLICAN CRITICISM ANSWERED

Certain eminent Anglican critics appear to regard it as fatal to the credibility of the Assumption doctrine that it cannot be confirmed by historical and archaeological research, any more than by scripture. But why on earth *should it* be susceptible of establishment in this way? That the Risen Body of Christ should reappear was necessary to the fulfilment of this mission, as a vindication of the Truth of His doctrine by His victory over death. There was no such need, however, of any such immediate manifestation on Mary’s part. There was no need that her glorified body should be seen, or even be “see-able” to earthly eyes, and it is in keeping with all that we know of her life that the glory of her passing, like the glory of the Annunciation, should be hidden from all except the rejoicing angels and saints. For the rest, the attitude of these Anglicans is surely strange, if they believe at all in a “Church” guided by the Spirit of God. For it implies the conclusion that all the “branches” of the Church which they recognize, both in East and West, whether in communion with the Holy See or not, were permitted by the Holy Ghost to remain in error, and to establish solemn feasts and devotions in honour of a false belief *during at least eight hundred years*, even if we accept no evidence for belief in the Assumption earlier than the age of St. John of Damascus (Eighth century).

Again, those who adhere to the theory of Anglican “continuity” with the Catholic Church of old England may fittingly be reminded of the attitude of that Church to the doctrine of the Assumption—of which very ample and conclusive historic evidence exists.

HE ASSUMPTION IN ENGLISH CATHOLIC TRADITION

I have already mentioned that the Feast of the Assumption was declared a public holiday under King Alfred, but the story of the feast in Britain begins a long time before the close of the ninth century, when he was reigning. As early as 690—less than a hundred years after the first landing of St. Augustine—St. Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherborne, writes of the feast as being kept in his time, in honour of our Lady's heavenly birthday. By the eleventh century—the era of the Conquest—the Feast was well-established, as well as that of the Immaculate Conception, which was vindicated by Osbert of Clare; the biographer of St. Edward the Confessor. The Conqueror's Primate, Archbishop Lanfranc, made the Assumption the principal feast of Our Lady in his calendar—and so it remained for all Englishmen while England was still Catholic.

It was kept on August 15 as a high holiday, with Church processions, sports and feasting in towns and villages throughout the country. Nor were the poor forgotten in the celebrations: thus, in 1254 the Bishop of Norwich bequeathed money to his nephew to be used to feed a hundred poor people each year on this feast day as long as he lived. "Our Lady of the Assumption" was adopted as patron by many city guilds, and was a frequent subject of representations in Churches. Many of these were destroyed during the Reformation and Civil War—especially those in stained glass—but one example survives in a stone-carving over the entrance to the Choir in York Cathedral—only a few yards from the official throne of the present Anglican Archbishop, Dr. Garbett, who has come out in protest against the papal definition! Among churches dedicated to "Maria Assumpta" we may notice Salisbury Cathedral, consecrated in 1258, in the reign of King Henry III; Aylesford Church, once a Carmelite mother house; and Eton College, styled by King Henry VI: "Our Royal College of the Blessed Mary of Eton, founded by us in honour of the Assumption of the said Most Blessed Mary." The ancient seal of the College showed Our Lady being uplifted by angels and crowned—and the same theme is presented in a sculpture over the Eastern gate of the College quadrangle which has recently been restored. Norwich Cathedral has an Assumption Chapel, and there are carved bosses of the Assumption in Abbey Dore, North Elmham, and Old St. Helens—to mention only a few. Paintings of the subject have also been discovered, though not many have survived the storms of the Reformation era. It seems very probable that the "Tree of Jesse" at Dorchester, Abbey was originally completed by a stained glass Assumption which has now been destroyed. Indeed, wherever mediaeval painted glass survives, we find fragments of Assumptions and Coronations—and two are represented in Roodscreens in Devonshire churches, dated in the 15th century.

It was not without reason that the England of that time was named "Our Lady's Dowry," and in protesting against the definition asserting her heavenly honours, the Anglican Archbishops of 1950 have only emphasized the *discontinuity* of their religion with the "Ecclesia Anglicana" of the thousand years between St. Augustine and Cardinal Pole, the last Catholic Primate.

THE REAL OBSTACLE TO REUNION

I have now shown that the Assumption definition of last year represents a belief which has for ages been universal among Catholics as part of their heritage of Faith, and which was held by the English Christians as strongly as any others at the time when Western Christendom was undivided. It may be seen, then, that it is quite unrealistic to speak of the definition as though it had introduced a novelty "increasing the dogmatic differences in Christendom" in our own time. There is, to be sure, a certain poignancy, as well as paradox, in the fact that the heirs of the Reformation which tore Britain and the North away from Catholic unity should now be imploring the Holy See not to worsen the appalling rent their ancestors made.

So far as reunion is concerned, however, the mere non-definition of a particular doctrine has no meaning one way or the other. If these Anglicans—including those who claim to be "Anglo-Catholics"—believed in Catholic doctrines in a Catholic way: that is, as the teachings of a competent, Divinely-guided spiritual authority to which they owed obedience, they would accept all the formal definitions of our Church—including those concerning the Papacy, which involve condemnation of the schism they have inherited. But since they do not become "Roman Catholics," it is obvious that they

do *not* believe in this fashion: and, that being the case, the question of the Assumption cannot make any difference at all. There is no use in talking about “Christian reunion” today as though our Church and other Churches were component parts of a single “Church” which was once universal and is now temporarily disrupted pending the discovery of terms of reconciliation. The Catholic view upon this subject is stated bluntly in the recent Papal Encyclical ‘*Humani Generis*,’ “*The Mystical Body of Christ and the Catholic Church in Communion with Rome are one and the same thing.*”

It cannot, therefore, be “reunited” with any other Christian community in the sense they imagine.

What can happen—and, we pray, *may* happen one day—is that other Christian groups, as well as individuals, may be given the grace to recognize the Mystical Body of Christ for what it is and become grafted into it by accepting its principle of authority in matters of Faith, and the laws by which it lives. It must be added—though with regret—that this talk of the “sharpening of differences” seems even less impressive when it is considered that certain Anglican modernists are able to remain in full communion with their Church and even to hold high office in it, while openly giving exposition of religious beliefs which are farther from traditional Christianity than those of orthodox Moslems, and of moral ideas which contravene the whole Christian concept of man’s nature and destiny.

The accent placed by our Christian dissident critics on divergence upon the Assumption serves, in fact, to give a quite false impression that the real distinctions between Catholic and non-Catholic are not very important, if only certain odds and ends of popular devotion could be left as “open questions” upon which people might believe as they liked. There is yet another matter upon which they entertain strange delusions, if we may judge by the trembling of the English “Church Times” about the possibility of the “secession of important individuals and groups as a result of the definition. As I have shown, the consensus of Catholic belief is universal: the crucial question which has been discussed recently among theologians was whether the Assumption could be defined, not whether the belief itself was true: and upon this they have long been in all but complete agreement. It seems inconceivable that any individual or group generally convinced of the truth of the Catholic Church and her teaching should find any difficulty in accepting the Papal degree of definition—and, in fact, no such difficulty has arisen anywhere.

THE MODERN MIND AND THE SUPERNATURAL

As for the modern world, its fundamental difficulty is not concerned with accepting this or that dogma as reasonable or historical but in the acceptance of the whole basic Christian idea of a supernatural order, revealed to man by a Divine Messenger. In comparison with the tremendous miracle of the Incarnation and the Resurrection—that the Eternal God assumed the nature of Man, was born of a woman, lived and died on this planet and rose again alive out of the grave—the raising of His Mother’s body to Paradise becomes a small thing to accept. It is not the last definition of the Church, in fact, which is in question, but the opening phrases of the Creed—the affirmation of God’s creative power over nature, and His loving condescension to our human race. It is *this* which we have to restore to the world of our time, along with the hope of immortal, joyous life for man, resting on Christ’s victory over death, with which the triumph of Mary is intimately linked.

The attitude of the “modern mind” to religion in general and Catholicism in particular is very well expressed in some of the puzzled protests of friendly liberal humanists in the matter of the recent definition. For these people, the Church’s really vital function in the world of today is to provide a sort of strong central bastion of the “common front” of Christians and freedom-loving humanists against Marxist totalitarianism: and they expect her to show herself accommodating towards the dissidence and doubt in the ranks of her “fellow travellers.” It is not a question—they seem to say politely—of asking you to compromise on any of your beliefs and traditions. We simply beg you to consider other people’s feelings, and not to emphasise the aspects of Catholicism which the modern world finds fantastic or “challenging” lest the spirit of goodwill be weakened.

WHAT THE CHURCH IS FOR

This argument would be a strong one if the Church were, in fact, a “political” organization concerned primarily with

the defence of civilized life and humane social values. But the question whether the definition of the Assumption is opportune” or not may be answered by saying that it is opportune precisely because the Church is *not* such an organization, and that this act serves to remind worldly-minded Christians and humanists of that great truth. The fact that Catholics have been “bearing the brunt” in the fight against atheistic Communism, both in East Europe and in the Asiatic mission field, does not mean that this temporal crisis—grave as it is—is the main preoccupation of the Church, as the Communists themselves suppose. No—the mind of the Church is directed not on the temporal but the spiritual plane: she is concerned with the natural order only because it is related to the supernatural order and man’s eternal destiny therein.

She is not, therefore, prepared to set aside her Divinely-given task of developing the Truths of Faith because the tide of persecution and peril is rising: she is not prepared to teach the truth about Our Lady, the Queen of Heaven, in subdued tones, for fear that by speaking out loud and clear, she may upset people who are thereby reminded that all their pro-Catholic sympathies and attitudes leave them still very far from the Faith.

THE SIGN OF CONTRADICTION

The fact is that the Church stands for a form of authoritative discipline ‘of the mind which the modern humanist finds highly repugnant. She makes a unique claim to teach the truth, by Divine Authority, about an order of reality—the spiritual—whose very existence is denied by many, while still more hold that little or nothing can be known certainly about it: and she insists that a clear knowledge of this “higher reality” is of supreme importance to mankind. No good can be served by encouraging the illusion that this “sign of contradiction” does not still stand between Catholics and those outside the Visible Church, which is the Fold of ‘Christ. If Western civilization is saved, it will not be by an alliance based on false pretences about the depth of its divisions: and—as we see it—it is even more necessary that Christ’s Truth should be fearlessly proclaimed than that civilization should be saved. The alienation of men from Mary—and so from her Son—has brought about the spiritual decay which is at the root of our “winter of discontent:” so that both our social restoration and spiritual health depend upon the strengthening of devotion to Our Mother in Heaven, as well as to Christ the King Whose glory is inseparable from hers.

The Pope himself, in one of his recent messages, has answered those who accuse him of flinging an untimely challenge in, the face of the spirit of the age, and of alienating humanist friends of the Church.

Speaking of those who teach the Faith, he says, “Never let them be led away by the false spirit of appeasement: let them not think that disloyal and erring souls can be brought back, with happy result, into the Church’s bosom, unless the *whole truth*, as it finds currency in the Church, is honestly preached to all, without disfigurement, without diminution.”

THE PRAYER OF ST. THEODORE

So much, then, for the defence of the cause of Our Lady’s Assumption against Christian dissidents and modern secular critics. It remains for me to end this essay, fittingly, with the words of one of the greatest of the champions of Mary among the Eastern Fathers, the glorious St. Theodore Studita.

“And now thou, who, passing beyond the clouds, enterest heaven and the Holy of Holier amid songs of triumph and joy, deign, O Mother of God, to bless the whole world. Give peace to the Church and victory to the Truth! Protect our homes against all enemies! Be propitious to all Christian people and pardon my rashness, that I have dared to speak of thee!”

Nihil obstat:

W. M. COLLINS, Censor Deputatus.

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