

THE DOGMA OF THE ASSUMPTION

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ONE of the chief reasons why the teaching of the Catholic Church is often opposed even by friendly critics is that they do not understand our technical terms. Protestants instinctively suspect, for example, transubstantiation it is such a long and foreign sounding word. The non-Catholic world has now learned of the doctrine of the Assumption through the great publicity given to its solemn definition. It is another unusual word. This may be, in part, the reason why its meaning has not been readily understood.

What do Catholics mean by the Assumption? They mean that the Son of God has taken His Mother, body and soul, to reign in glory with Him. They mean that Jesus Christ preserved the body of His Mother from dissolution in the tomb. Before discussing the belief of Christians down the centuries, it is worth while to observe that there is nothing very remarkable about the claim made for the Mother of Jesus. It would have been very remarkable, on the contrary, had there been no Assumption. For this would have meant that the Blessed Virgin, though not heir to the sin of Adam, would, nevertheless, have been made to suffer the consequences of that sin.

This becomes more clear when we remember that the bodies of all the just are destined to rise again. "What is sown corruptible, rises incorruptible; what is sown unhonoured, rises in glory: what is sown in weakness, is raised in power, what is sown a natural body, rises a spiritual body." (1 Cor. xv. 42-44.) So the body of the Virgin Mary, like those of all the brethren of Jesus, would in the end have been transfigured in glory. "As all have died with Adam, so with Christ all will be brought to life." (1 Cor. xv. 22.) Without any special definition of the Church it could, therefore, have been argued that this was fitting for the Immaculate Mother of God to be raised in glory without that period of waiting which is the result of the Fall of man.

But there is no need to speculate on what might have been. It is enough to discuss what has really happened. We may ask first, is Mary, body and soul, in glory? and, secondly, how can we know that this is true? In order to answer these questions we must inquire how Catholics know the truth about any doctrine of faith. For the dogma of the Assumption is not in a different category from every other. Catholics do not profess belief in any doctrines defined by the Church only after examining the reasons given by the Church for her decisions. First of all, they accept the truth of God upon the Church's authority. Then they apply reason to discover why the Church solemnly defines a doctrine. The Catholic, in other words, does not believe the Church merely because he finds himself in agreement with her definitions. The Catholic agrees with her definitions because he is convinced beyond all doubt that God has guaranteed the authority of the Church from error.

We must ask how the definition of the dogma of the Assumption came about. Before doing so, however, it must be made clear that the Church never, in fact, teaches new doctrines. But from time to time she defines doctrines whose full meaning was hitherto not appreciated. In the year A.D. 325, for example, the Church defined the doctrine that Jesus Christ has one and the same nature with God the Father. This took place at the Council of Nicaea. The technical term used by the Fathers of the Council was that Jesus Christ is consubstantial—with the Father. No one would suggest that it had taken Christians nearly three hundred years to discover that Jesus Christ is truly God. But it took all this time for the Church to feel the need of stating the old doctrine in fresh terms. The reason was that certain Christians had fallen into the error of calling Jesus Christ divine in a large and vague sense while denying that He is truly God.

It was more than a hundred years after the Council of Nicaea that another Council (Chalcedon, A.D. 451) defined the doctrine that Christ has two complete and perfect natures, the nature of God and the nature of Man. Christ has two natures—the Council declared—each perfect in itself and each distinct from the other. Yet these natures are perfectly united in one Person. That Person is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Once more we can say that Christians had always believed this truth. The Church now defined it because some religious thinkers had confused the divine with the human nature in Christ.

There are two examples of how the knowledge of the faithful was clarified by the guidance of the Church. In neither case did it take hundreds of years for these truths to be given by God to His Church. The truth was there from the beginning. That Jesus Christ is true God and true Man is clearly stated in the Holy Scripture. But the implications of this truth became clear beyond doubt only after theologians had disputed among themselves. When the time was judged opportune, the Church silenced controversy and declared in unmistakable terms the truth entrusted to her keeping.

Now we may take a third and, to our present purpose, a more important example. In the year A.D. 431 a Council of the Church was held at Ephesus in order to give the faithful some guidance about the position of the Virgin Mary. Everyone knew that she was the Mother of Jesus. Everyone also knew that Jesus is truly God. Yet some said that Mary could not rightly be called the Mother of God (Theotokos). She should be called only Mother of Christ. For He, could only have received His human nature from His mother. So, once again, the supreme authority of the Church needed to be heard. The Church defined the doctrine that Mary is truly the Mother of God. Every mother is the mother of a person. We do not say that Mrs. Smith is the mother only of the human nature of her son John Smith. We say that she is the mother of this person John Smith. So Mary was declared to be the mother of this Person Who is truly God. Thus she is truly the Mother of God.

This example is an important one for the following reason. If anyone were to read history without understanding the nature of the Catholic Church, he might be tempted to say. "It wasn't until the year A.D. 431 that Catholics started to call the Virgin Mary 'Mother of God'." In a way he would be right. But in another way he would be very wrong. He would be right in saying that this title was officially confirmed by the Church's authority only in A.D. 431. He would be wrong in thinking that until the fifth century Christians had not known that Mary is the Mother of God.

Now let us come to the question of the Assumption of Our Lady. A man knowing nothing about the Catholic religion might have opened any newspaper on November 2nd and said: "I see that the Catholics have invented a new doctrine. They have suddenly decided that the Virgin Mary has been assumed, body and soul, into heaven." But he would be wrong. The Catholic Church has not invented a new doctrine in A.D. 1950 any more than she did in A.D. 431. It is not a question of teaching new truths. What the Church has done is to make official a truth entrusted to her from the beginning.

Now we may ask—is it true to say that the Assumption of Our Lady has been believed by Christians from the earliest days of the Church? Again, why has the Pope chosen this moment to define the doctrine? It is easy to understand why other dogmatic definitions had to be made. The voice of the Church had to be heard because some Christians were denying doctrines. But no one has been denying the doctrine of the Assumption. So, it may be argued, even though this doctrine is true, there seems to be little reason for insisting upon its truth at this moment and of imposing it upon the faithful.

The first and more important question to answer is whether or not the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is, indeed, a fact. If it is true, it does not seem to matter when the Church declares that the fact must be accepted. We shall enquire later why the Church has chosen this moment. But it is more to our purpose to show first that the Assumption of Our Lady is and has always been one of those truths committed by God to the guardianship of His Church.

A matter-of-fact seeker for the truth might be expected to demand historical proof of the Assumption. If Mary was taken into heaven he might ask when did it happen? from where was she taken? and what occurred in heaven, when she arrived? These sound to be reasonable questions. But in fact, the Assumption of Our Lady is not, strictly speaking, a matter of history. For history concerns itself with those things which happen at a particular time. The Assumption of Our Lady is an event which did not take place in time at all.

In order to understand how this can be true we, must notice that the word Assumption covers a whole series, of events. It may be thought that the Assumption means the actual taking of the body of the Virgin Mary from this earth. But that is not what the Church means by the Assumption. The doctrine is concerned, not with the taking of Mary from earth, but the taking of Mary into heaven. That Mary was taken from a certain place is obviously a matter of history. But the entry of Mary, body and soul, into the glory of heaven could not conceivably be known to historians. This consideration is important. It should not be dismissed as a mere play on words. The point may be illustrated by the example of the

Ascension of Our Blessed Lord. It is a matter of history that at a certain moment, forty days after His Resurrection, Jesus Christ was taken from the sight of the apostles. Historians dispute as to the exact date of the occurrence. The only document we have to guide us is the Acts of the Apostles. From it we know that He had been speaking to His disciples and “While they looked on, He was raised up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” (Acts 1. 9.)

Consider this example. Jesus was taken from their sight. They did not see Him enter heaven. That He entered heaven is a matter, not of history, but of divine faith. Two men in white garments standing near the bewildered disciples addressed them in these words. “Ye men of Galilee, why stand you looking up to heaven? This Jesus who is taken up from you into heaven shall so come as you have seen Him going into heaven.” (Acts 1. 11.) The point is that history must be silent about the glorious entry of Jesus into heaven. It is not a fact about which history can speak. For history deals in time. Heaven is in eternity.

We should not, therefore, expect history to record the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. It might well have recorded the circumstances which closed her life on earth. But even of these we are left ignorant. The early Christians would have liked much more information about the life of Mary the mother of Jesus. But Holy Scripture is very sparing in details. It is as though the humble handmaiden of the Lord was protected from publicity. “And Mary said: My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. Because He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid.” (Luke 1. 46-48.)

Writing at the end of the fourth century, St. Epiphanius draws attention to the fact that in searching the Scriptures men can find little about the life of the Blessed Virgin. ‘They will not find there either the death of Mary; nor if she died; nor if she was buried, nor if she was not buried.. The Scripture hath kept complete silence on the end of Mary because of the greatness of the marvel so as not too much to astound men’s minds. As for me, I do not venture to speak of this. I keep it in my mind and remain silent.’ We may share with the writer his regret that the Scriptures do not give us an account of the last days of Mary on earth. We may also regret that they do not give us—as they do of Our Lord’s Ascension—explicit testimony to the fact that she was received in glory. But, as we have already seen, the full significance of all the words of Holy Scripture was not known to the faithful from the very beginning. As years went by the Church unfolded more and more completely the precise meaning of all that was contained in that body of truth, both written and unwritten, revealed in the apostolic age.

Just as there was a gradual growth of knowledge about the Son of God, so with the passage of time there was a growing understanding of the nature of the woman chosen to be His mother. It would be surprising if such development had not taken place. In every living person truths possessed in childhood grow clearer as the mind matures. The Church may be regarded as a moral person ever growing in maturity. The truths deposited in the infant Church, developed under the light of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, do not alter. But their content becomes more clear. The Church does not receive new revelations. That is why no new doctrine can ever be proposed to the belief of Catholics. But the guidance of God is with the Church in the twentieth, century no less than in the first or fourteenth century.

It is sometimes asked why there seems to have been no great interest in such doctrines as the Assumption in the first centuries of the Church. The answer is that a lack of records does not necessarily prove a lack of interest. But, in any case, it is reasonable to suppose that theologians would seek to understand the precise truth about the Incarnation—the central doctrine of the Catholic Faith—before turning their minds to related problems. Thus we find in the writings of the Fathers that controversy raged about the Godhead of Jesus before the precise question of His two natures was discussed. The doctrine of the two natures, in turn, was defended against the Monophysites before the existence of two wills in Christ (the divine and the human) was vindicated against the Monothelites. Doctrines are usually defined in what we may call the order of theological urgency. The position of Mary as Mother of God would obviously have to be safeguarded before her privilege of being conceived immaculate. If Mary had not been Mother of God, presumably she would not have been conceived without sin. Similarly it is logical to suppose that had she not been exempted from original sin, the heritage of all other creatures, she would not already have entered body and soul into glory with her Son.

Some writers have declared that the doctrine of the Assumption is based upon spurious stories. Their view, though

erroneous, is understandable. For the authentic Scriptures say nothing explicit about the Assumption. But apocryphal works profess to give details of her death and translation to glory. There is, for example, a work called *De Transitu Mariae*, written probably about the year A.D. 400. In this account Jesus is said to have appeared in the room where Mary lay dying in the presence of the apostles. He committed her soul to the care of Michael the Archangel. On the following day the account goes on—while the apostles were, carrying Mary to burial, Christ again appeared and bore her away in a cloud. In heaven her body was reunited to her soul. According to other accounts the body of the Blessed Virgin lay three days in the grave before it was taken by angels to heaven. Another version tells how at her death Adam and Eve appeared in testimony of her being the Second Eve whose place was prepared in heaven by her Son, the Second Adam.

These apocryphal writings are worthy of our consideration. They do not, it need hardly be said, form the basis for Catholic belief. But their antiquity suggests that even in early ages the faithful believed that the close of the Virgin Mary's life on earth was singular. Lacking clear guidance, the opinions of the first Christians may have varied in many details. Some seem to have held that Mary's body never saw death. Others that she died, remained incorrupt and rose again. In the Coptic Church, for example, there were two feasts—one celebrating her death, the other her resurrection. It is significant—to say no more—that despite differences in detail we know of no Christian writer who thought that the body of Mary corrupted in the tomb. There is no record of anyone ever thinking that the end of Mary's earthly life followed the ordinary course of nature. This is not, of course, a certain argument for the doctrine of the Assumption. But it is an indication of its early acceptance in the Church.

We must say frankly that what is called the argument from silence must be used with great caution. It would be wrong, for example, to argue from the silence of the fourth Evangelist that St. John did not know that Jesus Christ changed bread and wine into His Body and Blood at the Last Supper. Nor should we be justified in concluding from gaps in the Gospel according to St. Mark that he was ignorant of the facts of the Incarnation of the Son of God, His birth in Bethlehem and early life in Nazareth. We may not, therefore, contend from the silence of Christian antiquity that the body of the Virgin Mary did not corrupt in the tomb. That alone would be an insufficient line of reasoning.

The argument from silence, however, although not conclusive, has a certain value. If, for instance, a full biography of a world traveler were to contain no reference to England we should be justified in suspecting that he had never visited this country. We know that Caesar came and that Karl Marx came. But nobody has told us of the coming of Cicero or Napoleon or even Hitler. This, of course, does not prove that they did not come. But the silence of history makes their visits highly improbable.

Keeping this reservation in mind, there is one argument from silence which gives support for ancient belief in the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. There is no town or country in Christendom claiming to possess the body of the Virgin Mary. Rome claims the bodies of St. Peter and St. Paul. Compostella in Spain proudly alleges possession of the body of the apostle St. James. The remains of many Christian martyrs are venerated throughout Europe in shrines reputed to be their tombs. It is at least interesting that no Christian community claims or has ever claimed to possess the body of the Virgin Mary. Yet if such a relic existed it would have been jealously guarded. It is impossible to imagine the tomb of any saint which would have been more carefully kept or more frequently visited by pilgrims than that which claimed to contain the body of her who gave birth to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

We may now consider the value of the apocryphal accounts of the Assumption. Although useless as a basis for defining dogma they nevertheless are evidence of a Christian tradition that the Son of God intervened to save His Mother from the corruption of the tomb. We have said that no suggestion is ever made by early writers that the passing of Mary was anything but unique. We may admit that what was written in the fourth century is imaginative rather than factual. Yet these writings are, at least, a testimony to a common belief that Mary's end was the occasion of a miracle. People believed that something wonderful had happened. Fables may therefore have been invented to satisfy Christians curious to know the details. It would be foolish to express surprise if myth, were presented to the faithful by pious writers. It is not only in matters of religion that writers seek to reconstruct an unknown past.

Most men agree, for example, that at some time or other the human race began. Reason may lead us to accept the fact

of man's creation. But reason can give us no further details. Consequently many theories have arisen to explain the origin of our species. In modern times any story which seeks to explain creation without a Creator is called a scientific hypothesis. A story which includes Almighty God is called a pious fable. But even scientific hypotheses, as they are styled, are really only guesses. Some may be good guesses, others bad. But if they seek man's origin in a microbe or a monkey all hypotheses are guesses.

So of the early stories of the Assumption it may be said that all sought to supply the known fact with unknown details. The faithful believed that Mary is body and soul in glory. Writers set to work to guess the rest of the story. Some may have made bad or even wild guesses. Others may have made good guesses. We do not know. All we know is that none of them is part of the truth revealed by God. The teaching of the Catholic Church is based not on guesses (whether good or bad) but on the facts God has entrusted to the safe keeping of His Church.

Nobody who understands the nature of the Catholic Church will be disposed to question its right and duty to be a teacher of truth. Nobody who understands the nature of the human mind would expect it to grasp at once all that a particular truth implies. Some truths—the Blessed Trinity, for example, and the Incarnation of the Son of God—are mysteries of such depth that no number of centuries would be sufficient to enable the mind of man fully to grasp them. No human words can describe the fullness of the life of God. The only word which can describe God is the Word of God. And the Word is God. We shall be less likely to wonder at the gradual realisation of the full glory of Mary, the Mother of God, if we recall that the history of Catholic dogma is a story of unbroken progress. It was not until the eleventh century, in the oath required of Berengarius, that the Church demanded explicit profession of faith in the changing of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ during Holy Mass. But the knowledge of this change was not hidden from the Church in the early centuries. Yet it was not until even later—the sixteenth century—that the Council of Trent made the word transubstantiation part of the Church's official language in describing the Real Presence. But already in the first century St. Paul was writing to the Corinthians: "Whosoever shall eat this bread, or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord." (1 Cor. xi. 27.)

When the Church defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception through the mouth of Pope Pius IX in 1854, nothing was being added to God's message delivered by the Angel Gabriel describing Mary as "full of grace." The further implications of that fullness were declared by Pius IX. So Pius XII has now authoritatively defined still further the meaning of that fullness. Here are his words in the Dogmatic Bull which defined the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin on November 1st., 1950:

THIS PRIVILEGE SHONE WITH NEW SPLENDOUR WHEN PIUS IX OUR PREDECESSOR OF HAPPY MEMORY SOLEMNLY DEFINED THE DOCTRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD.

FOR THESE TWO PRIVILEGES ARE INTIMATELY LINKED TOGETHER. CHRIST, INDEED, OVERCAME SIN AND DEATH BY HIS OWN DEATH.

WHOEVER IS BORN AGAIN TO A NEW LIFE THROUGH BAPTISM HAS CONQUERED SIN AND DEATH THROUGH THE SAME CHRIST.

BUT GOD DID NOT WISH TO CONFER UPON THE JUST THE FULL EFFECT OF THE VICTORY OVER DEATH UNTIL THE END OF TIME SHOULD COME.

THE BODIES OF THE JUST, THEREFORE, AFTER DEATH RETURN TO DUST. ONLY IN THE LAST DAY ARE THEY JOINED ONCE MORE IN GLORY TO THEIR SOULS.

BUT GOD WISHED THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY TO BE EXEMPT FROM THIS GENERAL LAW.

FOR SHE BY A SINGULAR PRIVILEGE HAD CONQUERED SIN THROUGH HER IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND THEREFORE SHE WAS NOT SUBJECT TO THE LAW OF CORRUPTION IN THE GRAVE. NOR DID SHE NEED TO WAIT UNTIL THE END OF TIME FOR THE REDEMPTION OF HER BODY.

For the Catholic the matter ends once the Pope has spoken. When the supreme head of the Church speaks, as we say, *ex cathedra* he makes an infallible decision binding upon the minds and consciences of all the faithful. The infallibility of

the Pope must surely be the most obvious of all Catholic doctrines. For if the Church cannot speak infallibly God has, in the literal sense of the word, deserted His Church.

There can scarcely be any rational explanation of the attitude of those Christians who declare that God's guidance of the Church ceased after the fourth General Council. If the Church was guaranteed against error in the first five centuries, why should she not need guidance in the last five centuries—or, for that matter, in the next five centuries? If the Church now has no need of divine guidance she had still less need in those early days when the faithful were so much closer to the times Christ and His apostles.

But, admittedly, those who deny the Church's present right to define doctrines rarely choose to base their argument upon lack of divine guidance. That is too obviously a blasphemy. Less obviously but no less truly is it a blasphemy to say that the supreme authority of the Catholic Church could define a doctrine which is indefinable. For if the Church is preserved from error, she must be preserved equally in the exercise of her power as in the power itself. If the Church teaches as a doctrine to be held by all what it is beyond her power to define she is already in error. If God is with His Church she must know not only what to speak but when to speak. A Church which has ceased to claim the right to promulgate the fullness of Christ's teaching has ceased, in fact, to claim to be the Church of Christ.

This consideration may help to give the answer to the other question which, as yet, we have not answered—if the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is true, how can this be known? The answer quite simply is—we can know it to be true only if the Church declares it to be true. That is the reason why although before the solemn definition Catholics believed in Mary's Assumption they could not have produced a proof with complete conviction. But it is not difficult to find other reasons for the truth of this doctrine.

The overwhelming majority of Christians throughout the world have believed in the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. If the Assumption were not a fact we should be forced to admit that God had permitted His Church to be in error. Consider not only the Church as she is today, but her long tradition. Take, for convenience, what we call the Middle Ages. Observe the whole Christian world divided unhappily between East and West but not yet split by the new religions of the sixteenth century.

Everywhere in the Church at that time the Assumption of Our Lady was celebrated. It was, in fact, celebrated with even greater splendour in the separated Eastern communions than in the Latin Church. It would be strange—to put it no more strongly—if the whole Church had been in error concerning the privileges of the Mother of God.

It is necessary to understand that the devotion of Christian people is evidence of their beliefs. There is an accepted saying among theologians: "Lex orandi, Lex credendi—the rule of prayer—is the rule of faith." When, therefore, we read the prayers in use in the liturgy of the Church, we are able to deduce the faith of the Church. Looking at the liturgical books of early days we judge that the present day belief of Christians in the Assumption is no different from that of Christians a thousand years ago. It is worth while to go back even beyond a thousand years. Here, for example, is a prayer taken from the Roman Sacramentary, a book sent by Pope Adrian 1 to the Emperor Charlemagne in the eighth century:-

THE FEAST WE VENERATE, O LORD, IS THE DAY IN WHICH THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD UNDERWENT EARTHLY DEATH BUT COULD NOT BE HELD BY THE CHAINS OF DEATH. FOR SHE IT WAS WHO BROUGHT FORTH THY SON OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST AND BY HER INTERCESSION, WE BESEECH THEE, MAY WE BE ABLE TO ESCAPE THE DEATH OF OUR SOULS. THROUGH THE SAME JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, etc.

The Mass in the Mozarabic rite celebrated the Feast of the Assumption with a similar prayer..-

O ETERNAL GOD, THOU DIDST ASSUME THE GLORIOUS VIRGIN MARY THROUGH THINE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON AND HER SON OUR LORD TO THE INEXPRESSIBLE GLORY OF A HEAVENLY THRONE. TO THAT GLORY NONE AMONG MEN HAS BEEN ASSUMED AND NO WOMAN SAVE HERSELF . . .

The objection may be made that although we quote the faith of early Christians in the Assumption we are unable to show the same faith in the very first centuries. This is a real objection. But it is no more valid against the doctrine of the Assumption than against many other doctrines which no Christian would think of denying. We have seen that the doctrine

which holds Mary to be the Mother of God was not formally defined until the fourth century. But doctrines are not defined overnight. A belief defined in one age has been inherited from the Christians who went before. It is not necessary that these doctrines should be found verbatim in the Bible. If it were true that only doctrines explicitly taught in Sacred Scripture could become the object of faith, there would be no case for belief in the Assumption of Our Lady. But if—as the Church teaches—the revelation of God is contained partly in the Scriptures and partly in tradition, the case for the Assumption of Our Lady is neither stronger nor weaker than the other dogmas which have been defined down the years.

It is opportune, therefore, to say a word about the theory that all doctrines must be found explicitly in Holy Scripture. The first and most apposite comment is that this doctrine itself is nowhere to be found in the Bible. No one can produce a single text of Scripture to prove that all the teachings of Christ are written down in the Bible. It can, on the contrary, be asserted on the authority of St. John the Evangelist that “there are also many other things which Jesus did: which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not—be able to contain the books that should be written” (John xxi, 25.)

The Church was teaching doctrine before a single line of the New Testament was written. It is unthinkable that Christ would have left His Church to be guided exclusively by the written word—even the written word of God. For this word cannot be understood without a teacher. The teacher cannot instruct without interpreting the written word. The living voice was necessary if not to give the plain meaning of Scripture—for all who read might do that—at least to give the meaning of those many Scriptures which, being far from plain, need to be interpreted. It must be added that we have no way of knowing which are the books of the Bible, except from the declaration of the Church. For in early centuries many writings were held in high esteem by the faithful. Every scholar knows that in some places the apocrypha were given equal reverence with the books we know now to be inspired. The Catholic Church decided which among these writings were authentic.

Christians who claim to take their religion exclusively from the Bible must first accept the warrant of the Catholic Church that their Bible is authentic. When the Scriptures are explicit there may be no need for a teacher. It is the meaning implicit in the word of God which demands the authority of a teacher divinely guided. This is yet another reason for recognizing that the infallibility of the Church’s authority is an indispensable sign of God’s Church.

Catholics are sometimes attacked because of their devotion to the Mother of God. It is said that such devotion is in some way un-English. This is a strange accusation in the mouth of an Englishman. For what made pre Reformation England famous in Christendom was the devotion and chivalry of the English people to the Blessed Virgin. An English King is portrayed in the National Gallery in London offering England to the Mother of God as a dowry. That is why this country has come to be called the Dowry of Mary.

If this nation was famous for devotion to Mary, it was in an especial way renowned for the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. Even in the old Anglo-Saxon Church, King Alfred the Great made the Feast of the Assumption a public holiday. In Canterbury in the eleventh century Archbishop Lanfranc showed the fervour of the pre-Reformation Church in England by proclaiming the Assumption the greatest of the feasts of Our Lady. The visitor to York Minster can see even today in the archway leading from the nave to the chancel a beautiful carving in honour of Our Lady’s Assumption. Whatever modern Protestants may think about Catholic devotion to Our Lady and the definition of the dogma of the Assumption, not they but English Catholics follow the tradition of the Ancient Faith of this Island.

No Catholic suggests that the definition of the Assumption of Our Lady was a matter of urgency. Catholics, with the majority of Christians, would have continued to accept that this privilege was given by Christ to His Mother even had the Church’s authority made no official pronouncement. But the Catholic can appreciate the wisdom of His Holiness Pope Pius XII in choosing the present moment for the promulgation of this ancient doctrine.

Today, as never before, the nations have fallen into the apostasy of materialism. There have been eras in history when men were doubtless more savage in behaviour. Life and property in other days may have been held more cheaply. We cannot well compare ourselves with those who came before us. For none is a safe judge in his own cause. But we can say that never before have so many men been determined to destroy all belief in religion and the after-life. There have been

unhappy episodes in history when in the name of false gods nations have arisen to stamp out the Christian Faith. Never before has there been a widespread attempt to destroy the name of God in the cause of unbelief.

One of the first targets for the mockery of unbelievers is the resurrection of the body. Those who deny the existence of a spiritual soul in man deride the notion of his body as a temple of the Living God. The Resurrection of Christ is held to be a fable and the resurrection of the body—the eleventh article of the Creed of Christians—is called a delusion.

What time, therefore, could be more opportune for the definition of the glorious Assumption of the body and soul of the Virgin Mary into heaven? While the enemies of religion scoff at all resurrection, Catholics rejoice at the exaltation of that virginal body which gave life to the Incarnate God. We have been told by the authority of the Church that the body and soul of the Virgin Mary reign in glory. From this dogma we derive fresh hope—that God, Who did not suffer the body of Mary to see corruption, will bid her children on the Last Day to reign body and soul in glory with their Mother and her Divine Son.
