

# OUR LADY'S ASSUMPTION

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THE year is 451 A.D. The place is the city of Chalcedon in Asia Minor. The occasion is the famous council, to which Christian history turns back respectfully.

All of that seems remote enough from our day and age. Yet it is linked, with that close unity which is Catholic, to the present moment and to a widespread movement that is capturing the attention of the Catholic world.

Into the assembly of the deliberating Fathers walked the Roman Emperor Marcian. His eyes are eager, and he makes of the assembly a surprising request.

"Find for me," he begs, "the body of God's Mother. It is my imperial desire and determination to build for it a beautiful shrine. Surely this immaculate body is the world's most precious relic and deserves for its monument a mighty basilica. If you will find me the immaculate body of Mary, I will have it sealed in the sacred security of a golden casket and placed under an altar of marble and precious stones. Find for me, I beg of you, reverend Fathers, the body that was once the shrine of the Incarnate Word of God."

## **An Unfulfilled Wish.**

There was a childlike simplicity about the request. The assembled Fathers hesitated. They knew where the bodies of Peter and Paul rested in the honoured security of the Vatican. The Cross of Christ, recovered by St. Helena, mother of Constantine, was once more safe in the keeping of the Church. The bones of the martyrs and the virgins slain during the first days of Christianity had been placed in beautiful reliquaries or under the altars of a thousand churches. But no city or cathedral or shrine or reliquary had ever so much as claimed to possess the body of the Mother of God. That was a relic which the Church had never been permitted to possess.

Then arises in the midst of the assembly St. Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem. The story that he tells is the simple narrative of what happened after the death of Mary, a story that was handed down in the memory of the Christians of Jerusalem. The assembled Fathers know it well. But we can imagine the Emperor leaning forward and listening with strained and delighted interest.

## **An Ancient Narrative.**

The day had come, said St. Juvenal, in substance, when the common doom of all Adam's children was to fall upon the Mother of God. It had fallen upon her Son; now it was to seek out His Mother. Mary lay upon her bed waiting for death.

Time had touched her with a light hand, for it is sin, not time, that ages and destroys. She was beautiful in her maturity; lovely even in the evening of life.

Moved by a common impulse that was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles, scattered to the far corners of the earth in their apostolate, returned to the death-bed of their Queen. They had clung to her in the terrifying days that followed the death of Christ. They had delayed fearfully about her in the interval that followed the departure of her Son in the Ascension. They were with her in the vitalising Pentecost when the Holy Ghost came upon them and lifted their timorous spirits to heights of apostolic heroism.

From her dwelling, the Cenacle, they had gone out to their world-wide mission, leaving her in the care of John, her adopted son. But she had always been their Mother and Queen, their strength in sorrow, their inspiration in their apostolate, the bond of their unity with one another and with Christ, their Master and her Son.

## **Mary Dies.**

Now, with death near, they re-assembled about her bed, sons reunited about their dying Mother, messengers of Christ hurrying back to be with Christ's Mother in the last few hours before her soul found its blessed release and escaped joyously into the presence of her Son. What messages they must have entrusted to her who was so soon to see their beloved Master!

Quietly and without agony she died. There were no lamentations about her death-bed. Though the hearts of the Apostles were torn with grief, as they saw her eyes close in a calm, unbroken sleep, and her merciful hands fold in a final gesture of prayer upon her breast, and, though they realised with a sharp pang that they would never again hear her repeat the story of Christ's thirty hidden years nor receive her wise counsel and encouragement in their difficult work of world conquest, they could not long be sad.

Without Christ, the world, they knew, had been for Mary an empty place. Even the Eucharistic Presence of her Son was no adequate substitute for His visible presence. She had been, since the Ascension, patiently waiting for her invitation to follow Him into His kingdom, as she had always patiently waited upon all His wishes. And though she had mothered His Apostles and embraced in a Mother's tenderness all the world for which He had died, she was waiting eagerly and expectantly for death.

### **Reverent Burial**

Now it came, not as the feared conqueror, but as the blessed liberator, and the Apostles were glad for her sake, even though their own loss was bitterly heavy. She died, and, dying, smiled into the eyes of her Son, come to take her safely through the gates of death into His living presence.

Among the Eastern peoples burial follows quickly upon death. So the Apostles, with loving, reverent, if reluctant hands, carried the body of Mary, fair even in death, to the tomb. Her lips still smiled with the final joy of anticipation that flooded her whole being as her soul left her body. Her hands were still clasped in her almost uninterrupted gesture of prayer.

They summoned her friends and relatives, drew the burial garments over her, and mourned and rejoiced. As evening came on, they carried her body to the cool, dark tomb, and, closing the grave, returned to her empty dwelling.

Undoubtedly, during that lovely burial, they remembered, abashed and ashamed, another burial in which they had not participated. She had often told them the details of that tragic procession from Calvary to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and shame had filled their hearts as they thought of the cowardice that had held them captive in dark corners and cellars, while the crucified Christ was borne to His borrowed grave by the hands of strangers.

Perhaps they felt that this reverent burial of His Mother was some slight atonement to Christ for their absence from His burial on Good Friday.

### **Thomas is Again Absent.**

Characteristically, St. Thomas arrived a day late. Poor Thomas had a way of being absent when important things took place. Yet, hard as it was on him, his way of arriving after an event had happened was a blessed thing for posterity. Because he missed the first glad reunion of the Apostles with the risen Christ, he gave to our Faith one of its firmest arguments. First, he doubted that Christ had risen; then he laid down his own conditions on which he would accept the fact; and, *finally*, he carried out those conditions when his searching fingers touched the wounds of Christ, and his hand was laid in convincing proof upon the Saviour's side. To Thomas we can be grateful for a kind of scientific sceptic's proof of the Resurrection.

Again, he was late when Mary died. But, had he been present at the death and burial of Mary, we might never have known that Mary was assumed from the grave.

Deeply regretting that he had not seen Mary in the calm peace of death, he asked the other Apostles to return with him to the tomb and roll back the stone so that he could, for the last time on earth, see the face that was the maternal counterpart of the face of the Master he had followed in life and was tirelessly preaching in unresponsive India.

### **An Empty Tomb.**

The Apostles, who were more than willing to see that sweet face again, led Thomas to the tomb.

They rolled back the stone, entered the cool, dark doorway, and then stopped motionless. Perhaps they were really not surprised. Certainly they had no fear that her body was stolen. They must at once have recognised the singular appropriateness of the miracle that copied for the Mother the resurrection of her Son.

For the tomb was empty. Where her body had rested, full-blown flowers were blooming. Through the tomb blew

not the slightest breath of death's corruption. Instead, it was filled with the perfume of flowers, mingled with scents not of earth.

But the body of Mary was gone.

### **Perfectly Clean**

The Apostles needed no one to explain the miracle. The risen Christ had clearly lifted His Mother from the earth. At His command her soul had rejoined her body, and she was body and soul with her victorious Son in His eternal kingdom.

If the victory of death over the body of Christ was short, its victory over the body that had borne the body of Christ could not be of long duration. Mary had been assumed from earth to heaven.

They knelt, these Apostles, at the empty tomb. They lifted their eyes towards the heavens, which now contained Mother and Son, reunited in the completeness of their personalities. And, when they rose again to their feet, it was to return rejoicing to the Cenacle, happy in the honour that had been paid to Mary, glad that her body was a relic too pure to be housed even in the loftiest shrine of earth.

From that moment on, the Christian world never sought for the body of Mary. Christians knew that it was reunited with her immaculate soul, and that both were with God.

### **A Satisfied Emperor.**

This is the beautiful tradition that St. Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, repeated for the Emperor Marcian as he sat with his fair wife, Pulcheria, among the venerable Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon.

The Emperor bowed his head in quick and approving assent.. That was precisely as it should have been. Why, it could not have been otherwise. He and his Empress looked at each other and smiled their agreement. They rose, and, as they passed through the midst of the Bishops, the last effort had been made, even to so much as consider finding the pure body of God's Mother upon earth. Eyes sought her gladly and spontaneously in heaven. But the Christians knew that, even were they sure of the place of her tomb, they would find it empty.

### **An Ancient Tradition.**

The tradition of Mary's Assumption into heaven is lost in the mists that surround the earliest days of the Church. We find great saints of the Eastern Church preaching on the subject at very early dates. St. Andres of Crete, St. John Damascene, and St. Modestus of Jerusalem talked eloquently of Mary's Assumption in the seventh and eighth centuries. In the West, by which we mean the Europe of today, St. Gregory of Tours spoke of the Assumption as a universally accepted fact, and he lived during the years 539 to 594.

In the Church, as we very well know, the observance of a feast may often precede the wide discussion of a dogma or doctrine. The Apostles and their immediate successors said Mass from the very beginning. Fragments of the prayers they used have come down to us. But theologians discussed the Mass and even invented the name "Mass" at much later dates. In fact, discussions usually arise only when someone has the temerity to deny something that has long been believed or practised.

At first, men use the holy gifts of God gratefully. They accept His revelations and His truths as beautiful and true. They see no particular reason for discussing or cutting into fine argumentative pieces what is clearly beautiful and an intimate part of their life's best devotion.

### **From the Beginning.**

So we find the Christian world keeping the Feast of Mary's Assumption far back in the days when Christians were more interested in loving God than in writing about Him, in showing devotion to Mary than in analysing the reasons why they did so.

Clear records show that in Palestine, from where St. Juvenal brought his beautiful tradition to the Emperor at the Council of Chalcedon, the Feast of the Assumption was observed with solemnity before the year 500. How long before that it was observed, no one knows. Records were carelessly kept in those days, and what records were written

were even more easily lost through persecution and the pillage of barbarians.

We do know, however, that feasts did not easily and quickly come into existence. The faithful reluctantly accepted anything new and strange. So, if a feast was fully and widely celebrated by the year 500, we may be sure that its real origin goes back several centuries.

By the year 600 we know that the Feast of the Assumption was celebrated throughout what is now modern France and large parts of Germany. Interestingly, France accepted the feast from the ancient monks of Egypt; so, in all probability, those grand old Egyptian monks, who loved Mary with the buoyant enthusiasm one finds in children and saints, had kept the Feast of the Assumption through long centuries before.

### **World-Wide Till Protestantism.**

In fact, every important form of Christianity, schismatic or orthodox, the extensive Greek Catholic Church, quite as much as the Roman Catholic, agreed in admitting the fitness and beauty and truth and antiquity of the belief in Mary's Assumption by her Son into heaven.

Today, as centuries ago, Roman and Greek Catholics agree in this tradition.

It was left for the Protestants of the sixteenth century, as their decidedly doubtful privilege, to throw aside the tradition and consign Mary's body that had tabernacled Christ to the corruption of the grave.

That attitude was not, however, surprising. In fact, it was in part with the whole Protestant revolt. The early Protestant revolutionists, who attacked the Church with any type of weapon at hand, were quite as violent in their attacks upon Mary. The hostility manifested by the sects towards the woman who had loved Christ and served Christ best is something of which modern Protestantism is often deeply ashamed.

By an inconceivable state of mind, the early Protestants demanded that Christ be honoured by dishonouring His Mother.

They claimed that Christ could be raised to new heights by dragging down His Mother to new depths. Protestantism's rejection of the Assumption was only part of its astonishing rejection of Mary as Mother and Queen. It almost demanded that Christ leave the body of His Mother to worms and the filth of the tomb. Strange, incredible denial of Christ's grateful heart.

### **The Voice of the People.**

But what has all this to do with us of the immediate present?

Saints are often canonised by the voice of the people. Moved by the dear signs of their heroic virtue, the Christian world cries aloud for their canonisation. In ancient days they rushed to the Vatican, summoned forth the Holy Father, and cried: "Give us a saint." And he would reply: "The voice of the people is the voice of God. You have a saint."

To-day the persistent cries of the Christian world hastened the canonisation of the Little Flower of Jesus and the Cure d'Ars in much the same fashion. It was almost as if the Holy Father had yielded to the voice of the people demanding a saint.

Somewhat the same thing has occasionally occurred in the case of dogmas. The people, either because they saw their beloved Faith attacked, or perhaps because they were moved by a divine impulse to stress some particular article of Faith, have clamoured that a truth long believed be proclaimed as divinely revealed.

### **A Clamorous World.**

An instance of this seems to be taking place about us today. A united Catholic world, suddenly, and apparently spontaneously, begs the Holy Father to proclaim the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary into heaven as an article of faith. From every civilised country petitions signed by millions of names have been sent to the Pope, all begging that Mary be given this signal honour.

The beautiful feast, long observed, with its consoling doctrine, long believed, has rested for centuries in the heart of the Christian world. Catholics have been content to celebrate the day and lovingly cherish their belief. Now they beg that the age-old tradition become a binding dogma.

Certainly so widespread and important a demonstration on the part of the faithful cannot be without deep

significance. The Holy Spirit has a way of arousing men's hearts to a realisation of sharp perils and pressing needs.

Perhaps, as the eyes of the Catholic world are focussed on the Assumption of Mary into heaven, the Holy Spirit is drawing men's hearts from the insistent claims of time to the almost forgotten claims of eternity. Surely the earth has pressed in upon us with a beauty and charm, a luxury and fascination overpowering in their grip on our senses. Can it be that just at this moment our eyes are lifted to Mary spurning earth and entering heaven, so that, seeing her glory, watching her triumphant passage through death into eternal life, earth may lose much of its power to fascinate and bind us to itself?

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is using the dogma as a way of showing afresh the importance of pure women. Our modern literature has grown often terrifyingly evil. The virtue of women *is* astoundingly flouted from the screen, the stage, the magazines, the best-seller. Philosophies of loose living have taught young men and women to regard purity as a bit of a joke, and vice as the inevitable pastime of youth. Purity has been considered prudery, and wanton women have found a widespread and quite frightening popularity with the public.

Now, if ever, the world needs Mary. It needs her purity and her sinlessness. It needs to be reminded that for the innocent Mother of God was reserved the glory of the Assumption; that, because her body was so wonderfully pure, it broke the binding chains even of the grave. The vision of the pure Mary, lifted body and soul into heaven, should do much to bring into sharp relief the beauty of purity and the dignity of motherhood, and the importance to the world of women whose lives are moulded on that of the Mother of God.

### **The World Waits.**

Whatever the reason for this sudden desire on the part of the Catholic world for a definition of the dogma of the Assumption, we may say that Christendom waits almost on tiptoe for the Holy Father to speak.

Perhaps he will not. But whether the petitions be granted or not, the sudden rebirth of interest in the feast and doctrine of the Assumption has given the modern world a new consciousness of the dignity and splendour of God's Mother. Men have re-awakened to how much Christ prizes purity and virginity. They feel a new interest in the saintly woman who follows the flower-marked footsteps of Mary. Youth grows reverent before women who are like their Heavenly Mother.

### **Almost Inevitable.**

The Christian world; until the dawn of Protestant doubt and denial, felt that, whatever other traditions might need deep faith and the humble acceptance accorded to mysteries, here was one tradition that simply cried aloud for acceptance. The human heart found the Assumption not only beautiful, but inevitable.

The body of Mary was unique among all the bodies ever formed to house an immortal soul. It was predestined by God to be the first temple of the Incarnate Divinity. It was the first shrine of God made man.

More than that, it was the fountain from which the Holy Spirit drew the sacred materials with which He formed, by an astounding mystery and miracle, the body worn through life by the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Nothing in all human history has been so distinctive as this privilege accorded to Mary's body.

### **The Purest Body.**

Art and devotion have never doubted that Mary's body was uniquely beautiful among all the daughters of Eve. "The living ark of the living God," St. John Damascene calls her. Uniquely sacred, uniquely beautiful, uniquely honoured, from her flesh and blood were taken the flesh and blood of God made man. Within her was performed: that mystery of the Incarnation which is the central doctrine of Christianity.

All comparisons fail beside the beauty and sacredness of this. The Ark of the Covenant was regarded as sacred by the Jews, and was decorated by the most exquisite art of the period, because it held the book of God's laws, the jars of manna, and, for a time, the tablets on which God had graven the Commandments.

When the ark was in danger of falling into pagan hands, the Jewish armies fought with a resistless courage and daring. When actually, because of the sins of the Jews, the ark fell into the hands of the Philistines, the Hebrew nation mourned in sackcloth and ashes, and gathered every ounce of their strength to rescue this precious shrine from the

sacrilege that polluted it.

Yet the body of Mary held, not the dead elements and records of the Old Law, but the Divine Author and Source of the New.

### **Inviolable Temple.**

At the gates of the temple built to God by Solomon, in the days before his fall, the people stood in wondering awe. It was the most glorious building they had ever seen; a house worthy of the God they had begged to occupy it. But, as yet, it was only a building, beautiful and aspiring, but unaccepted by Javeh.

Then suddenly a great shout rose from all. Every throat became a joyous trumpet as the glory of God glowed within the temple. The blinding light that was His shadow overwhelmed them with its power and splendour, and Israel knew that God had accepted the temple, and dwelt in it, through the Shekinah, the faint reflection of His glory settling upon the Holy of Holies.

From that moment the temple was no mere building of magnificent dimensions, sweeping lines, and throbbing beauty. It was the chosen habitation of God with men. Within the Holy of Holies, empty except for the memory of God's momentarily visible acceptance and presence, only the priest might go, and he after the most elaborate purifications. Nothing defiled dared approach God's home with men.

Unfaithful Israel, in bondage, wept as they thought of the pagan soldiers who had sacked the temple and razed this house of God. Jeremias was only the voice of all Israel lamenting the systematic pillage of God's temple by a filthy enemy.

The temple that Herod later built, God did not deign to honour with His visible presence. Yet, because it recalled the former temple which God had chosen in reflected glory, the Jews regarded it as too sacred for even the touch of pagan sandal.

The Roman Emperor, contemptuous of the Jews' fierce protests, placed his standards in the sanctuary sacred to God alone. And Judea groaned in anguish, and then, in futile wrath, rattled its sword.

The Saviour, justly angry, whipped from His Father's house those, who polluted it with animals and a trade in coins. The Jews, after His death, placed their bodies in death between their temple and the Roman armies intent upon destroying it.

### **A Purer Temple.**

No one can fail to admire this noble reverence of the Jews for God's chosen temple. It is an instinct that Protestantism is quick to understand and approve. Yet there was a far more important temple. Mary's body was the temple of the living God, not in His vague and reflected glory, but in His most complete and beautiful and reassuring manifestation. There never was a shrine of the Most High comparable in importance to the fair flesh of the Mother of God Incarnate.

We may almost say that the Christian world has shuddered with even more repugnance at the thought of corruption touching the body of Mary than did the Jews when they thought of the contamination and destruction of the ark and their temple. Mary was the ark and the temple of the God of the New Law.

### **No Touch of Corruption.**

Sacrilege is something that appalls even the unbeliever. Yet it would seem little short of sacrilege that the body of Mary, the shrine of God's divine Son, that lovely first temple of the Saviour, that walking tabernacle that carried the living presence of Christ among men, that fountain from which was drawn Christ's human nature, should have been left to the cruel corruption of the grave.

Through the gateway of death Mary must go. That was a destiny from which Christ Himself did not shrink. The common fate of all mankind is really not a cruel and terrible thing. It is rather the opening of a barred door, through which men walk from time into eternity. In a moment called death perishable life is transmuted into life without change or ending.

Yet, because to men this gate of death has always seemed black and repelling, Christ walked through it, smiling, so

to speak, confidently at us over His shoulder, and holding out a reassuring hand to us who must follow. And He asked His Mother to walk the same common pathway through life's mysterious ending into heaven's sure beginning.

That was inevitable, but not really terrible or terrifying.

The corruption, however, that seized upon the body following death was quite a different thing. That was ugly, repellent.

### **The Penalty of Sin.**

Adam, still innocent, was to have been translated, body and soul, from paradise to paradise. For him there was to be no death and no consequent corruption. But, once he had sinned his passage out of this life to the next became not a simple process of translation, but the opening of the black gate of death. His penalty was made more terrible by the fact that his soul must leave behind it the body in which he had sinned and must consign that body to the rotting grave.

His body, soiled and contaminated by sin, was to be turned over to its executioners, the worms and their quick, ugly companions of corruption. The filth of sin was to be punished by the filth of the grave. The sinner's body was to sink back into a state that vividly suggested the corruption of sin that had rotted his soul. Men could not see the soul corrupted by sin; They dared not look upon the sinner's body as it corrupted in the grave..

### **No Guilt of Sin.**

Yet here again Mary's body was different. It had never been the cause nor the companion of the soul's sinning.

Her soul, Through the Immaculate Conception, had been, from the first, free from the stain even of original sin. God's Mother could not be under the dominion of the leader of God's enemies even for a second. And throughout life her soul grew in perfection of virtue without the slightest, mist of sin blurring its beauty.

Her body matched her soul in sinlessness. Never was it for her the slightest occasion of imperfection. On the contrary, her heart beat only to the tempo of God's love. Her hands were clasped in prayer or were busy in charity. Her lips uttered such words as delighted God and charmed her fellow-men. Though she herself did not know it, during the years that preceded the Incarnation her body was being prepared by divine grace and her free co-operation for the moment when it would welcome the coming of its Divine Son and Guest.

In preparation for that moment, virginity was her lovely vow. Tireless labour in the temple and, later, in her little home was her occupation. Prayer bent her knees and lifted her eyes as she besought God to speed the coming of the Messiah. If she saw herself in any direct relationship to Him, it was as the little handmaiden of His Mother, someone who, she thought, would be far worthier than herself.

Her body matched her soul, and served her soul in all its dreams and high purposes. Neither body nor soul so much as nodded in the direction of evil or fault.

### **Out of Her Flesh.**

Sinlessness such as this was essential for God's Mother. The flesh from which was to be drawn the flesh of God Incarnate must be virginal. No slightest deflection towards Satan could draw God's Mother from His allegiance. If the Saviour's external appearance was to be fashioned from hers, her eyes, into which He looked with infant and growing love, must be undimmed by any shadow of sin. Her lips that touched His baby lips and taught them the wisdom in which He grew before God and men must be entirely without stain. The lips of Isaias, destined to speak of God, had painfully to be seared with a living coal. The lips of Mary were to speak not only of God, but to God as mother to child.

Her hands that bathed His infant body must be far purer than the water in which she dipped Him: Her body, against which He rested trustingly in infancy, and which He later folded in His manly arms, could not have been in the least soiled by evil. And her senses, unlike the senses of others of our race, since they were destined for so noble a realisation, could not have felt the hot rebellions that torment the senses of the rest of mankind.

### **Hence Free.**

So, though death was her destiny, as it was His, still her body had never felt the corruption of sin, and did not

deserve to be punished with the corruption that follows the death of the sinner. Satan had had no power over her. Nor should nor could the grave boast this power. Her body had been associated in purest union with her soul. He had conquered the grave and torn from death its sting. By a kind of divine fitness, we may expect that Christ would not relinquish to the ugly contact of the grave the Mother who had held Him in her arms, and about whom He had wrapped all the deep affection of the world's most perfect Son.

All this seems quite beyond the need of argument. The very decencies demand it. Divine gratitude seems intimately at stake. The devotion of a Son is involved.

### **Precious Relics.**

For precious relics, the bones of a martyr or the body of an unknown soldier, mankind devises every possible safeguard. They are carefully placed in steel and cement, in the hope of holding corruption at bay. They are honoured by the gifts of grateful men and guarded against profaning hands by watchful priests or pacing sentries.

If this is a thoroughly natural instinct with more or less ungrateful men, we may be sure that Christ, who loved His Mother with the deepest love, and Who had the power of holding back corruption from her body, would do for her what other men try in vain to do for their beloved dead.

### **“Hands Off.”**

The vessels of the altar that hold the Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ may not be touched with unconsecrated hands, and are kept from sacrilege under lock and key. The warning sign, “Hands Off,” holds back the visitor who, in his walk through Mount Vernon, looks respectfully at the desk at which Washington sat, the dishes he used, the clothing he wore. One puts into the secret recesses of a desk, safe from curious and unsympathetic eyes, the letters of a dear one. Modern embalming delays the body's corruption less effectively than did that of ancient Egypt; but it holds off decay as long as it is in the power of modern science to do so. Our dead are today lowered into safe-like vaults, by which all, save the inevitable internal disintegration, is held at bay.

But comparisons piled on comparisons only serve to prove the same universal human impulse to safeguard things that are precious or sacred or beautiful from the touch of the curious, the corrupt, the sacrilegious, the destroyer.

All that men lack is the power. Our best safes are cracked. Our most skillful embalming fails in the end before the relentless siege of time, or else leaves the once-beautiful body a withered, ugly parchment, wrapped close about ungainly bones. The profaner breaks into the guarded sepulchre of the Egyptian pharaoh, the tomb of an unknown soldier, or the tabernacle that holds the sacred vessels.

The forces of relentless chemistry cannot be denied their toll of the dead body. Strive as we will, driven on by our universal instinct and desire, we cannot protect from corruption the things we love and cherish most dearly.

### **Christ Has the Power.**

But Christ has this power, and always had it. Occasionally, as if to recall His power of withholding the devastating effects of death, He guards the body of some saint from decay. Usually it is the body of someone whose life has been extraordinarily pure. When the grave is opened by those interested in his possible canonisation, the body of this virgin saint will be found pliable, fresh, uncontaminated; and, as the Martyrology says so frequently and pleasantly, “breathing a sweet odour.” Knowing this possibility, the Little Flower, with characteristic humility, prayed that her body might be permitted to corrupt. She had her prayer answered.

Christ, however, needed no such minor proofs of His power over death's corruption. He proved this power beyond the shadow of doubt in His own Resurrection.

There He held back with strong hands the dire and ugly effects of death. He stripped the grave of its horror and its power.

### **Death's Final Defeat.**

In addition, He promised that on Judgment Day, as St. Paul almost shouts in triumph, He will actually sweep aside the effects of death from bodies long since dissolved into dust, and will lift them in resurrection to be reunited to their

souls as partners in their eternal destiny.

Heaven reaches its completeness when the body has rejoined its soul. Till then the man is not a complete man; for, made of body and soul, fighting through life with the united powers of body and soul, differentiated from other men, not merely by virtues or intellectual qualities or developed power of will, but by distinctive features of face and figure, by individual sense reactions and memories, he must be in heaven body and soul. Only thus is he complete and adequate and ready for his perfect eternity.

### **In Advance For His Mother.**

Christ can, then, sweep aside the effects of death. For all mankind He will do so when, at the General Judgment, body and soul are reunited in resurrection.

The conclusion from all this seems almost too patent. Christ has the power of withholding the effects of death. He loved His Mother with a perfect love and a devoted gratitude. Could He have failed to withhold the effects of death from her fair body?

He was in heaven, body and soul. His Sacred Heart would cry out, demanding that the most pure body of His Mother share with Him the same beautiful privilege, as she had shared with Him every joy and sorrow of His earthly life.

Loving His Mother, He would love her wholly, body and soul. Wanting her with Him, He would want her completely, just as He had known and loved her in life. The arms of a son, which often ache for the enfolding arms of a mother, in His case need not ache in vain.

### **The Resurrection Imitated.**

So, in what seems a lovely imitation of His own resurrection, we may well be sure that Christ lifted the body of His Mother from her tomb. His power had split the rocks that held Him captive, and rolled away the stone sealed against just such an event. His body, lifeless and cold, suddenly glowed with warmth and vigour and beauty and life, as, each wound a glowing jewel, He rose triumphant over death. From that day Easter lilies, strangely enough unknown to botanists before, bloomed throughout the world.

And for His Mother? Gratefully He did for her, and with even more willingness, though not the same significance and necessity, what He had done for Himself. He repeated in the Assumption a little of the wonder of His Resurrection.

### **Reunited.**

We picture that scene of the reunion of Mary's body and soul as reverently as it has been pictured in Catholic art, and as inadequately. The body of her who was God's Mother lies wrapped in the tranquil sleep of a death that has come to find her ready and eager and joyously waiting. Her hands, scarred not as His had been with the cruel bite of the nails, but with her tireless labour for men, are folded upon her soft, maternal breast that never was crossed by so much as a temptation to sin.

Her immaculate heart is stilled and silent. No longer do its beats count the round of her love for Him. Her eyes are closed. They had often grown weary as they watched in prayer or beside His infant cot; they had stung with unshed tears under the Cross; they had been lifted in wordless, uncomplaining weariness during the long years she had awaited death. She is motionless, dead.

Then the unseen, downward sweep that is the resistless rush of angels' wings in full flight. Mary's soul, immaculate, radiant in the first happiness of reunion with her Son, stoops to earth and flings itself in incredible ecstasy into the body that had been its beautiful sheath and tireless partner.

Hands unfold and reach out in eager longing for her Son, a longing soon to be fulfilled. Beautiful as she was in life, her face is now transfigured with a beauty that is of heaven; Without doubt she rises. She lifts her eyes, sees the sealed door of the tomb as penetrable as the air of dawn, and beyond, the open heavens and her waiting Son.

### **Triumphant.**

It is Mary, once more in all her loveliness and beauty of body and soul; Mary as Christ had known her, as the Apostles had seen her, as all the poor and weak of Nazareth had found her; Mary, the same, but glowing with a beauty that has no further place on earth.

She passes from the tomb, flowers spring up where the touch of her pure body has vivified the earth. With the happy escort of angels about her, she follows the glorious pathway marked out for her by her Son in His ascension, a pathway from earth, through the confines of space, to the eternal gates swung open in welcome. And lo, she is in His waiting presence!

Did angels in reverence turn aside from that meeting of Mother and Son? Were they reverently silent, as adequately and completely He thanked her for what she had done for Him? Or did their shouts of acclamation to their new Queen rock the battlements of heaven?

That we cannot know. But we may be sure that the very dome of heaven trembled a second later, when Christ, who had promised thrones to the least of His followers, led Mary to the throne reserved for her, and the shouts of the Church Triumphant rang out to acclaim her who was crowned by her Son, with a crown of stars, Queen of Heaven, Sovereign of Earth, Protector of Purgatory.

Perhaps the picture is largely fanciful. But all our pictures of what happens beyond the grave are inadequate, where we can be sure that the reality far outstrips our wildest and most glowing fancies, Human language has its limitations, and, though it may prove the fact of the Assumption, it cannot begin to paint the living reality. No Evangelist dared attempt it. A pen, uninspired and faltering, must struggle vainly with the impossible, but tempting, task.

### **Important To Us.**

Yet surely, as we have strongly suggested, the Assumption is important to our whole human race. Purity is a difficult virtue. The fascinations of earth bind us with sometimes almost resistless strength to our petty pleasures, our pitiful ambitions, our inadequate friendships, our slightly contemptible attachments.

Never more persistently than today have the delights of earth been offered in substitution for the joys of heaven. To the modern man the considerations of earth are all-important; the pursuit of heaven's vast possibilities is shoved off to a dim convent library, to unread books, to half-empty churches.

Earth and its opportunities are insistently pressing. Its pleasures have never been easier to attain or more persuasive in their appeal to our senses. Purity is laughed at as futile weakness. Other-worldliness is treated as cowardly or stupid.

So Christ was good to us when He lifted up His Mother into heaven, and, through the gates opening for the Assumption, gave us a glimpse of what in measure, shall be the reward of all the good, the pure, the devoted, the other-worldly. His powerful providence seems clearly at work when the Feast of the Assumption and the tradition and doctrine that underlie it take on today a new importance and pressing insistence in the Catholic consciousness.

### **Beyond Earth.**

We needed to be reminded that the triumphant pathway of each pure body will be in time that same pathway that was traversed by Mary as she entered heaven. We needed to be reassured that beyond earth is a world that is the reality of which all earthly glory is the shadow.

Surely it is a beautiful thing that our eyes are lifted by the doctrine of the Assumption from the clamour and persistent insistence that grip our senses and lull our wills, to the sight of the purest of women conquering death, rising above earth, and moving straight into the arms of Christ the King.

If, by the Assumption, Christ rescued His pure Mother from the earth, through the feast and doctrine of the Assumption He gives her back to an earth that needs pure women almost more than anything else.

If He opened heaven to permit His Mother to enter freely and joyfully, He, once more, seems to open heaven that we may glimpse her glory and realise that her glory, in measure, shall be that of all those who serve Him faithfully and well.

For a world sick with a love of self that comes close to self-hatred, and busy with stupid activities and dull

pleasures that consume more than they give, God has given us a vision of His Mother crowned with a diadem of stars.

**To Mary, Assumed Into Heaven.**

Mary, Queen of Heaven and Mother of Men, lift our hearts with you in the glory of your Assumption. Raise us above the contaminating touch of impurity. Teach us how small earth becomes when viewed from the battlements of heaven. Make us realise that death is the triumphant gate through which we shall pass to your Son. Make us bear in mind that some day our bodies shall rejoin our souls in the unending bliss of heaven.

And, when our hour of death has come, lead us safely into the presence of Him who is the Hope of our resurrection and the Rewarder of those who have served Him, in imitation of you, His glorious Mother. Amen.

Nihil Obstat:

J. DONOVAN,  
Censor Deputatus

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