

The Assumption of Mary

The following prayer is from Ephrem the Syrian in the 4th century: “Girl, empress and ruler, queen, lady, protect and keep me in your arms, lest Satan, who causes evil, exult over me.”

Pope Pius XII infallibly proclaimed on November 1, 1950, that the Blessed Virgin Mary was taken up into Heaven, body and soul, at the end of her life. The Vatican had received millions of petitions from every class of people throughout the world, from cardinals and bishops to ordinary Catholics in parishes, urging a formal pronouncement of the Assumption. So, in 1946, the Pope sent a letter to every bishop in the world, asking if they thought that the bodily Assumption of Mary should be proposed and defined as a dogma of faith. Their response was virtually unanimous in support of such a definition. Many great theologians and saints of the Church in both the East and the West have spoken and written about the Assumption. It is at least implied in Scripture and can be found in early Christian writings and in liturgical books that celebrated the Feast of the Assumption many centuries before it was infallibly proclaimed including the Coptic liturgy which was brought to the West by Cassian in the mid-sixth century. It is depicted by a ninth century artist in the subterranean basilica of St. Clement in Rome. In “assuming” Mary, God did for her what all the saved will enjoy after the Last Judgment. Mary, who was redeemed by Christ, was the first creature to enjoy the fruits of the Redemption. It is also remarkable that there is no tradition or legend whatsoever about either the physical relics of the Blessed Mother or of a tomb in which she lies buried.

Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab

While there are a number of interpretations of the Book of Revelation, I have chosen those most in keeping with today’s feast.

11:19a God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple. The woman in the following verse and the ark of his covenant are one and the same. Besides the comments about this in the notes on today’s Gospel, the primary role of the ark in the Old Covenant was to mediate the presence of God to Israel and the role of Mary is to bear Christ to the world. If in the Old Testament, the ark, which was made of precious gold and wood, held such a place of honor due to its mediating the presence of God, we should not be surprised that Mary holds a place of surpassing honor in the New Testament. There were two main functions of the ark: 1. It bore the presence of God and, after the Annunciation, Mary bears God in her womb. Just as the ark contained the tablets of the Old Law, the manna, and the staff of Aaron, Mary holds in her womb Jesus Christ the Messiah who is the New Law, the true bread from heaven, and the true high priest who offers His own life for us. 2. The ark also served as a mighty weapon in Israel’s holy wars. Mary plays a decisive role in the Church’s spiritual battles. Upon the revelation of the new Ark of the Covenant in Rev. 12, the great battle in the heavens begins. Mary is the spiritual mother of all Christians (Rev. 12:17) and she is granted power and protection over the dreaded dragon who cannot prevail against her (Rev. 12:13-16.) A further consideration is that the Jewish people expected the Ark to reappear at the coming of the Messiah.

12:1A great sign John does not call what he sees a vision, but a sign, which reminds us of the sign God promised to give to the faithless King Ahaz (Is. 7:10-14). There the sign was of the maiden who would bring forth a son, the future king, and name him Immanuel. **appeared in**

the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, which tells us that she is glorified, that she is in heaven. with the moon beneath her feet, Since the moon was widely worshiped, this would seem to be a symbol of ultimate conquest over the world's idolatry. and on her head a crown Mary is the queen mother of God's New Covenant kingdom. Because kings in the ancient Near East had innumerable wives but only one mother, the common practice was that the mother of the king took the office of queen with the title of "Giberah." In 1 Kings 2:19 we can clearly see that intercession was a fundamental part of the giberah's office. of twelve stars. This would probably stand for the twelve apostles.

²She was with child and wailed aloud in pain Her cry is intercession to God to bring about the new birth promised. as she labored to give birth. The pains of childbirth are a stock image for the suffering of the entire people as a new era is about to take place with the birth of the Messiah.

³Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, This would seem to be the ancient serpent of Genesis 3, the deceiver of the whole world. with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. The seven heads and horns and diadems represent its universal power. However, in 19:12 we are told that Christ holds title to an indefinite number of diadems as conqueror of the devil.

⁴Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman This echoes the condemnation of the serpent in Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head while you strike at his heel." We are reminded of the whole long time that mankind awaited the coming of the woman's offspring, who was to crush the serpent's head. about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth.

⁵She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. This seems to be an allusion to the messianic Psalm 2:9. Her child was caught up to God and his throne. This puts us in mind of the Ascension and Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father. Despite the dragon's vigilance, its hatred was futile.

^{6a}The woman herself fled into the desert This is the desert of refuge and protection like the desert of the Exodus where the Lord called and espoused his people. where she had a place prepared by God.

^{10ab}Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have salvation and power come, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Anointed One." This hymn praises the triumph of God and his Anointed One: Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:20-27

Keep in mind that Paul insists on the unity that exists between Christ and Christians: as members of one single body, of which Christ is the head, they form as it were one organism. Therefore, once the resurrection of Christ is affirmed, the resurrection of the just necessarily follows.

Brothers and sisters:

²⁰Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. This denotes more than first in time, it is a Jewish cultic term. The offering of the first fruits was

the symbol of the dedication of the entire harvest to God. So, the Resurrection of Christ involves the resurrection of all who are in him. Christ, the firstfruit, rose from the dead and the rest of the crop will follow!

21For since death came through man, the resurrection of the dead came also through man.

22For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, Just as we all share in the effects of Adam's sin, so we will all share in the effects of Christ's victory over sin.

23but each one in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ;

24then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, This refers to the end of time when Christ, having completed his redemptive mission and brought all the elect to the glory of his resurrection will show his total victory over the evil spirits. Then, having completed his work, he will hand over to his Father the royal authority that was conferred on him as Savior of the world and Head of the Church. **when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power.**

25For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. Christ's sovereignty over all creation will achieve its final complete form after the Last Judgment when he will have victory over the devil, over sin, suffering and death. Christ will offer all creation to his Father as a kind of trophy, offering him the Kingdom, which up to then had been confided to his care.

26The last enemy to be destroyed is death, With the resurrection of the dead at the end of time, Christ's victory will be complete and everything, including death, will be placed "under his feet."

27for "he (God) subjected everything under his feet." In pagan mythology, rivalry among the gods sometimes led to the son of a god supplanting his father. St. Paul wants to make it quite clear that Sacred Scripture suggests nothing of that kind. No subjection is possible among the three persons of the Blessed Trinity, because they are one God.

Luke 1:39-56

39Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, Ein Karem is a village situated 5 miles west of Jerusalem. It is the "town of Judah" which is associated with the life of John the Baptist. Here Zechariah, John's father, had his summer home and here the Virgin Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth. One tradition that Luke draws upon is from 2 Samuel, 2-11. He intentionally sets up the subtle but significant parallels between Mary's Visitation with Elizabeth and David's effort to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. When Luke tells us that Mary "arose and went" into the Judean hill country to visit her kinswoman, he reminds us of how David "arose and went" into the same region centuries earlier to retrieve the Ark. Upon Mary's arrival, Elizabeth is struck by the same sense of awe and unworthiness before Mary that David felt standing before the Ark of the Covenant. Parallels continue as the joy surrounding this great encounter causes the infant John to leap with excitement, much as David danced with excitement before the ark. Finally, Luke adds that Mary stayed in the "house of Zechariah" for "three months", recalling how the Ark of the Covenant was temporarily stationed in the "house of Obed-edom" for a waiting period of

“three months”. Taken together, these parallels show us that Mary now assumes a role in salvation history that was once played by the Ark of the Covenant. Like this golden chest, she is a sacred vessel where the Lord’s presence dwells intimately with his people. Luke also draws upon a second tradition from the Books of Chronicles. This time he brings into his story a highly significant expression once connected with the Ark. The term shows up in verse 42 where Elizabeth bursts out with an exuberant cry at the arrival of Mary and her Child. Although the Greek verb translated as “cried out” seems ordinary enough, this is the only place where it is found in the entire New Testament. Its presence in the Greek Old Testament is likewise sparse, appearing only five times and each time the expression is used there, it forms part of the stories surrounding the Ark of the Covenant. It actually refers to the melodic sounds made by Levitical singers and musicians when they glorify the Lord in song. It thus describes the music that was played before the Ark as David carried it in procession to Jerusalem (1Chron 15:28 and 16:4-5) and as Solomon transferred the Ark to its final resting place in the Temple (2 Chron 5:13). Alluding to these episodes, Luke connects this same expression with the melodic cry of another Levitical descendant, the aged Elizabeth. She too lifts up her voice in liturgical praise, not before the golden chest, but before Mary. Luke’s remarkable familiarity with these ancient stories enables him to select even a single word that will whisper to his readers that this young Mother of the Messiah is the new Ark of the Covenant.

⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Mary visits her kinswoman to offer assistance and to seek advice. She knows of the pregnancy of Elizabeth from the angel in verse 1:36. The angel Gabriel announced both the coming of John to Zechariah and the coming of Jesus to Mary and he also announced their names.

⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, Elizabeth’s child, John, was the first prophet in 400 years, the last of the OT and the first of the NT. and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth’s experience parallels that of Rebekah in Gen. 25. Both Luke and the Greek OT use the same verb to describe children leaping or stirring in the womb. As Rebekah’s experience signaled the preeminence of Jacob over his older brother Esau, so the similar experience of Elizabeth was a sign that Jesus would be greater than his older cousin John.

⁴²cried out This is the only time that the word is used in the NT. In the 5 times that it is used in the OT it referred to the liturgical praise associated with the Ark of the Covenant. in a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, Elizabeth blesses Mary with the same phrase used by Gabriel to Mary. These words were also spoken to Jael and Judith in the OT (Judg 5:24-27; Jud 13:18) Both women were blessed for their heroic faith and courage in warding off enemy armies hostile to Israel. Victory was assured when both Jael and Judith assassinated the opposing military commanders with a mortal blow to the head. Mary will follow in their footsteps, yet in her case both the enemy destroyed and the victory won will be greater, for she will bear the Savior who crushes the head of sin, death, and the devil underfoot. and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Following the angel’s salutation to Mary, (Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.) this verse forms the next part of the prayer known as the “Hail Mary.” (Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit

of thy womb) Tradition tells us that the following phrase, “Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners” was prayed by the people as Mary was assumed into heaven.

⁴³And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord This title reveals the twin mysteries of Jesus’ divinity and Mary’s divine maternity. Being aware of the giberah tradition, Elizabeth announces Mary’s queenship and declares her amazement that the queen of Israel should come and be her midwife. Mary’s divine motherhood was the first Marian dogma expounded by the Church. The Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) defined her unique relationship to Christ and honored her with the title “Mother of God.”
should come to me?

⁴⁴For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

⁴⁶And Mary said: Here begins the hymn of praise and a recital of God’s covenant faithfulness called the Magnificat (Latin for “magnifies”) which extends through verse 55. Mary extols humility and rejoices in God’s blessings on the lowly. The song also introduces the theme of God’s “mercy”, which flows into the following episode. The Magnificat is filled with themes and imagery from the OT. It closely resembles the Song of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10. “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;

⁴⁷my spirit rejoices in God my Savior

⁴⁸for he has looked upon his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed:

⁴⁹the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.

⁵⁰He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

⁵¹He has shown the strength of his arm, and has scattered the proud in their conceit. Verses 51 through 53 insist upon the great reversals of salvation history: one must be in need to be saved, one must be blind to be given light by God. These verses point out how God is accustomed to act. He has always done it and will always continue to do it this way.

⁵²He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

⁵⁴He has come to the help of his servant Israel for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
⁵⁵the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever.”

⁵⁶Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. We celebrate the Annunciation on March 25. At the Church of the Visitation there is a huge picture of Mary assisting at the birth of John whose birthday we celebrate on June 24.

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from “Catholic for a Reason” Chapter IX by Timothy Gray, “Refuting The Attack On Mary” by Father Mateo, the “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke” with commentary and notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, “The Truth About Mary: A Scriptural Introduction to the Mother of Jesus for Bible-Believing Christians” by Robert Payesko, “The Apocalypse and the Third Millennium” by George T. Montague, S.M., “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” “The Navarre Bible: Corinthians,” and “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers” by Aelred R. Rosser.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.