



Theology Corner

Vol. 115 – August 16th, 2020

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What is the Teaching on the Assumption of Mary?”

This weekend, we celebrate the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. A lot of people are unsure about what this doctrine means, and some consider it a relatively new doctrine of the Church. The fact of the matter is that while it is a relatively new dogmatic pronouncement, the belief itself is not new at all. But before getting into the history of the doctrine, what do we mean by the Assumption? The exact teaching is dogmatically defined as such: “The Immaculate Mother of God, the ever-Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.” This quote is taken directly from Pope Pius XII’s papal bull, *Munificentissimus Deus*, in which he formally issues this pronouncement which happened to be one of the extremely rare cases of an *ex cathedra* statement. I make this note because most people assume that Catholics consider whatever the pope says as an infallible statement, but this is not true at all. In fact, in the history of the Church, there have only ever been two such statements by popes: the formal declaration the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (1854), and of the Assumption of Mary (1950).

In terms of history, the assumption of Mary was included in ancient liturgies and homilies from the earliest history of the Church, although it was never mentioned in the writings of the Church Fathers (many speculate that this was because it was common knowledge). The discussion of the Assumption later became quite common in the Middle Ages. As an interesting fact, even the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther included the fact of the Assumption in a homily in 1522 (five years *after* the publication of his Ninety-Five Theses!).

Why is the teaching of the Assumption of Mary consistent with Catholic theology? Its consistency stems from Mary being preserved from Original Sin. We know as Catholics that Original Sin brought death and corruption into the world, particularly in reference to human beings who were preserved from death in Eden. To be clear, the doctrine of the Assumption does not require for a Catholic to believe that Mary did not undergo death, but only that she did not undergo a corruption of the body. Catholics in the East believe that her death was more like a sleep (they call it the “Dormition”), while Catholics in the West tend to believe that she did die, not on account of any sin, but to resemble Christ more perfectly. Remember, Christ was of course without any sin whatsoever, but he still died. The difference between the death of Jesus and the death of Mary is that death was voluntary for Jesus and of his own power, while Mary would have died naturally and assumed not of her own power, but by the power of God. Regardless whether one chooses to believe that Mary did in fact die or fell into a deep sleep, we know from the doctrine of the Assumption that her body was without corruption and that her death would not have been one that is a consequence to the punishment of sin, for this would be unjust for someone who was without sin either original or personal. A bodily assumption is also fitting considering that she countered the curse of Eve just as prophesied in Genesis 3:15.

What does the Assumption mean for us? Well, it points out the great reward for being without sin, and it also points to the fact that we too are created for heavenly glory in both body and soul. In other words, while we can awe at the perfection of Mary in the integrity of her body and soul, we can rejoice in hope that we will also share in this same glory with the Holy Trinity if we remain close to Christ in faith, hope, and love so that we may be brought to union with him in spirit after death and in gloried body at the resurrection on the last day.