

ST. MARY, THE ASSUMPTION, AND HEAVEN

by Eliot Kapitan

Imagine being taken to a wonderful place. The Grand Canyon at sunrise. Some great cathedral church. Niagara Falls between two great lakes. Grandma's house for Thanksgiving Day. Disney World. The giant sequoia forest in Muir Woods near San Francisco.

These are good and exciting places that fill us with awe, fill us with gratitude. Being there is almost like being in heaven.

HOW THE CHURCH PRAYS

This imagining gives us some idea of what the Church celebrates on the solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is a holy day of obligation which comes around each year on 15 August. This year it falls on a Sunday, the first holy day of all.

The Assumption also holds special honor in that it is one of only six days in the liturgical year with a true vigil. The other solemnities are the Vigil of the Holy Night of Easter (the first and mother of all vigils), the Nativity of the Lord (25 December), Pentecost (50 days after Easter), the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist (24 June), and Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles (29 June).

Here is a prayer for the Assumption from the Church's liturgy.

Let us pray
[that with the help of Mary's prayers
we too may reach our heavenly home.]

Pause for silent prayer.

We believe this. Mary, indeed, fell

Father in heaven,
all creation rightly gives you praise,
for all life and all holiness come from
you.

In the plan of your wisdom
she who bore the Christ in her womb
was raised body and soul in glory to
be with him in heaven.
May we follow her example in
reflecting your holiness
and join in her hymn of endless life and
praise.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

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WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES BY PRAYING

St. Mary has a dear place in the Christian life. Holy Scripture narrates her role as "Mother of God," *Theotokos*. This is her oldest title. She also stands witness to the start of Christ's ministry, to his passion and death, and to the empowering of the Church by the breath of the Holy Spirit.

Mary's assumption is deeply embedded in the memory of the Church. The day of death of any holy one is regarded as the day of new birth. There is written evidence by AD 529 of great devotion in Jerusalem and Palestine to Mary's anniversary of "falling asleep in the Lord." By AD 602, the Falling Asleep of the Mother of God, the Dormition, was a feast celebrated by the Eastern Churches. In the West, a similar evolution took place, and by the late eighth century, the Church in Rome began to use the term "assumption." In her death she was with God. She did not ascend on her own power, but was taken by God's power.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

asleep in the Lord (her dormition). Mary, indeed, was taken into heaven (her assumption). She is the first, in place of honor, to follow Jesus Christ the Lord. She is pattern for us. She is one more promise of what will happen to us all.

WHAT THE CHURCH LEARNS BY BELIEVING

In both East and West, St. Mary was and is revered. The taking of her body and soul to heaven was and is a cherished belief. But even with centuries of prayer and liturgy, it was not until 01 November 1950 that the Church formalized the dogma. Pope Pius XII decreed Mary's bodily assumption into heaven by apostolic constitution.

The Church's prayer and belief teaches us this:

- All holiness comes from God.
- All life is gift of God.
- Heaven is our true home.
- Giving praise to God is our right and duty.
- Christ and Mary and all the saints are patterns for our Christian life.
- Death and resurrection is our entry into heaven.
- What happened to them will happen to us.

Look to the Bible readings used in the liturgy. They lay bare our belief about life after death and the Christian path to heavenly life with God:

- **Vigil Mass:** 1 Chronicles 15:3-4, 15-16; 16:1-2 – the ark of God taken to God's tent. Psalm 132 – a song for ascending to God's holy place. 1 Corinthians 15:54b-57 – victory over death given through Christ. Luke 11:27-28 – the blessed hearers and doers of God's word.
- **Mass during the Day:** Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab – the woman gave birth. Psalm 45 – the queen stands at the right hand. 1 Corinthians 15:20-27 – Christ is raised first, then those who belong to him. Luke 1:39-56 – the Almighty has done great things.
- **Office of Readings:** Ephesians 1:6-2:10 – in Christ Jesus God has given us a place in heaven.

Sing the "Salve Regina." Most hymnals will have the song in Latin as well as one or more English translations. It sings of Mary as queen and mother of mercy.

Look up these official sources. Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus*, 01 November 1950. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter VIII, especially art. 59. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, glossary and no. 966: "The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians."

St. Mary shows us the way. When we fall asleep in the Lord, we too will be taken to a wonderful place – life with God for ever and ever.