

If a small child hurts his finger he runs to Mammy crying. All Mammy has to do is to kiss the finger and it is well again. Children know their mother loves them and has made a great many sacrifices for them.

In the same way we look on Mary as our heavenly mother. She is the mother of us all. We look on her as our mother who loves us a great deal, who watches over us to protect us. She is the mother to whom we can tell every joy and every sorrow. We remember Jesus' words as he was dying on the cross; he said to Mary, 'Woman behold your son', and to John he said, 'Son, behold your mother' (John 19:26-27). We have always regarded this little incident as being symbolic for us: as Jesus was dying on the cross gave us his mother to be our mother also.

One example of someone who looked on Mary as a mother is [St. Thérèse of Lisieux](#). [Thérèse](#) lost her mother before she reached ten years of age. Then she was fighting for her life during a grave illness and was miraculously cured through the intercession of Mary. Thérèse looked on herself as nestling in the arms of Mary. The child Jesus found protection in the arms of Mary and so also did Thérèse. The reason for our great joy today as we celebrate Mary's Assumption into heaven is because we are celebrating a great privilege given to our heavenly mother.

There is in all of us the tendency or temptation to 'play God' sometimes. We will not allow God to have control over our lives. We don't surrender our lives to God. Sometimes we stand before God as if we are little gods. We hold out our hands to God full of ourselves so God cannot give himself to us because God can only give himself to us if our hands are empty. Our life is meant to be giving more and more of ourselves to God. We are complex people and we give God only part of our lives, the part that suits us. But to meet God in heaven we will have to surrender ourselves fully to God firstly, to let God be God in our lives and accept that we are only human.

Mary's greatness lies in the fact that she was humble before God and surrendered herself to God. Her words to the angel at the annunciation are words that we need to

meditate on a great deal, 'Let it be done to me according to your word.' (Luke 1:38) Surrendering of herself to God did not mean a perpetual spiritual honeymoon but a giving of herself more and more to God as time went on. We can see evidence for this in the Gospels: at the presentation of Jesus in the temple, Simeon told her that her soul would be pierced with sorrow; when Jesus was twelve years old the family had a misunderstanding over why Jesus got lost for three days. Mary once again learned more about surrendering to God as Jesus told her that he had to be about his Father's business.

Because she surrendered herself so much to God, God filled her with his presence just as God fills us when we surrender ourselves to God. Mary's sinlessness and being 'full of grace' led naturally to her assumption, body and soul, into heaven at the end of her life. (See Rom 6:23) The Church has believed in Mary's Assumption for centuries, although it was only proclaimed a dogma in 1950 by Pope Pius XII.

A way for us to surrender ourselves to God and be filled with the presence of God like Mary is to pray the Rosary daily. It is a most beautiful prayer, a prayer that can bring us closer to God and keep us closer to God. When we pray the Rosary we are not just saying prayers. Saying the prayers is to calm us down so that we can tune in to God and our blessed Mother. While we say the prayers our minds are meditating on the fifteen great events in the life of Jesus. When we are in desperation and we don't know how to pray, it is a good prayer and is a most beautiful way to keep in contact with our heavenly mother. When we do so we can unite ourselves with Mary in expressing her sentiments:

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid." (Luke 1:46-48)

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II

In my lifetime, the way we do wakes when someone dies, has completely changed. For most of my childhood years, having a wake meant spending three days visiting a funeral home, spending hours each of those days visiting with family and friends, sharing memories both sad and funny about the deceased. Of course, with all that time, lots of other things went on too, as men snuck out to the bar and kids played stoop ball in the streets.

Now days one rarely sees a wake last for more than one evening—and even that is generous considering that most wakes, if people have them at all, consist in spending an hour together just before a funeral or a burial. Sometimes technology enters into the picture, when families project dozens of photos of the departed, from infancy to ripe old age. Yet most modern wakes are quick and tidy.

However we do wakes, or vigils as they are often called, they seem to have one purpose: to give the community a chance to try and capture the life of someone they loved who now is no longer with us. The references might be about work, or about big family parties, or about how someone interacted with a town or neighborhood. From all the moments of someone's life, we pull a few incidents and frame them in an attempt to get an image of someone. We frame that person in terms of the past.

The feast we have today, the Feast of the Assumption, can bring an important perspective to the reflecting we do about ourselves and those we love at a time of death. Because this feast is not an attempt to define Mary in terms of her family and hometown of Nazareth. Rather, it pictures Mary in terms of God's purpose for her and her place in God's vision. Because Mary's importance is how she opened herself to God, even when she didn't entirely understand it; and therefore how God used her to provide the environment in which Jesus would grow, and also to give us an image for how the meaning of each of our lives finds its peak in our fulfillment of God's purpose for us.

In the Gospel people are so excited by Jesus' words that they praise his mother, how blessed she was to have given birth and nursed a prophet like this. But Jesus, without taking anything away from Mary, says that all of us who seek to do God's will, who open ourselves to God's Word, are also blessed like she was. For God's Word contains a vision of what our lives mean that we cannot find anywhere else. When we listen to God, we are part of the shaping of history into the Kingdom of God, of bringing time into its ultimate future.

Think, then, of how unblessed are those who have little vision or only small visions of the purpose of their lives . . . make a little money, to have fun, to avoid pain and sickness . . . how little of life they are seeing! And even when we are blessed enough to see our lives in terms of loving others and the families to which we belong, those image of love and family take on greater meaning when we see how they fit into God's vision. Jesus came to open the future for us; today's feast says that Mary was part of that future. And it invites us to be part of that too.

Mary's Assumption is an opportunity for us to think about the ark and shape of our own lives—not just the moments you and I are privileged to live but, even more, how those moments lead to a fullness for ourselves, others, and the world, which only God's grace can bestow.

III

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary into heaven. The Dogma of the Assumption was solemnly declared by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950. This was the declaration that after her life on earth was completed Mary was taken up to heaven body and soul.

The belief in Assumption dates back to the early centuries of the Church. Christians always believed that Mary's death was a falling asleep in the Lord or dormition. She was immediately taken up to God. Actually the Dormition of Mary or, to use our terminology, the Assumption of Mary, was one of the most popular themes in religious art of the medieval times.

With the exception of Jesus Christ, who is the Eternal Word, conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary is the greatest person to ever exist. She is the greatest person to be conceived through a human mother and a human father. She is greater than Buddha, or Mohammed, or Moses, or David, or any of the great people of history. She is the one who was conceived without sin. She gave her life so we can have a Savior. She is the greatest of us all.

The greatest of us all is a woman. Mary brought a new dignity to every woman who has ever lived and who ever will live. Women bring life into the world and nurture this life. Because Mary sacrificed herself for us, our women bring unique reflections of God into the world, and nurture His Image with their bodies and with their lives. Women are life givers. Christian women give life to the Divine. Women are sources of love, carriers of love and nourishers of love. In these days when the most lucrative industry in the world is the pornography industry, where mainly young girls are exploited, Mary reminds us of the Dignity and Respect that are the natural rights of every female among us. We men are reminded that it is our obligation to care for and protect our women, be they little girls, teens, wives, singles, widows or the elderly. Recently, the young men in our youth group have been meeting to pray for our young women. All men need to pray for those among us whose biblical origin was a gift from God to Adam.

In these days of the glorification of the self, Mary reminds us of a person whose body and spirit were created for another. She said "Yes" to the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation and allowed God to radically change her life. She nurtured and cared for the child that others wanted dead. She supported Jesus as a young man when some thought he was deranged. She stood with Him as He was tortured to death to complete the Father's plan of redemption. She accepted John and us into her heart and became our mother. For all this and more than we could ever imagine, Mary was rewarded with her total union with God at the conclusion of her earthly life. She was assumed into heaven. Now, seated the closest to her Son, the judge of the Living and the Dead, within whisper length from his ear, she brings our prayers before Him. She brings the prayers we offer when we honor her in the Rosary. She brings the prayers we offer when we just call out, "Mother, help us."

And we pray today on the feast of her assumption. We pray for our ladies, young and old. We pray for our brothers and sisters who are hurting. We pray for peace. We pray for ourselves.

IV

Aug. 15 is the feast of the ultimate destiny of the human body: the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, body and soul, into eternal bliss. Although it was not specifically defined as a dogma until 1950, belief in Mary's bodily assumption has always been part of Christian faith.

Why 1950? God has his own reasons for the timing of such things. But even from a human perspective, the middle of the 20th century provided a perfect historical context for the Church's declaration. As Father Donald Calloway writes: "During the twentieth century, the body ... began to be seen by many people as a burden, something to be overcome and manipulated. ... Thus began such procedures as sex changes, plastic surgery, and genetic manipulation. In a certain sense, it can be said that the twentieth century preoccupation with the body has led to a schizophrenic approach to ... the body: either worship it as divine, or seek to manipulate it (or even kill it) through technological means" (*The Virgin Mary and Theology of the Body*, p. 45).

In the midst of such schizophrenia, Mary's assumption proclaims the ultimate truth about the human body: it is destined to share in the eternal glory of the Trinity. Christ came *bodily* to redeem us *bodily* – and Mary's bodily assumption is the proof that what Christ did on the cross worked. Mary is *fully redeemed* body and soul. In this sense, Mary is the hope of all humanity. She lives what we hope for.

The declaration of the Assumption in 1950 was also a powerful response to the devastation of World War II. The horror of Hitler's concentration camps had only recently been exposed. Moreover, man had discovered how to split the atom – the basic building block of the physical universe – and had exploited this knowledge with terrifying consequences.

A Catholic doctor named Takashi Nagai survived the explosion that rocked Nagasaki on Aug. 9, 1945, killing nearly 80,000 of his countrymen. Writing of Dr. Nagai's experience, author Robert Ellsberg observes in his book *All Saints* that "Nagai found it remarkable that as a result of heavy clouds obscuring the originally intended city, the bomb had been dropped that day on Nagasaki, an alternate target. As a further result of clouds, the pilot had not fixed his target on the Mitsubishi iron works, as intended, but instead on the Catholic Cathedral in the Urakami district of the city, home to the majority of Nagasaki's Catholics. He noted that the end of the war came on August 15, feast of the Assumption of Mary, to whom the Cathedral was dedicated."

At an open-air Mass just days after the bombing, Dr. Nagai said to the survivors, "We must ask if this convergence of events – the ending of the war and the celebration of her feast [Mary's Assumption] – was merely coincidental or if there was here some mysterious providence of God" (*All Saints*, p. 13). We might say that in response to the A-bomb, in 1950 the Church dropped a G-bomb, a "*grace-bomb*" that truly is the hope of the world. "The woman," representing us all, has been fully redeemed body and soul. Three years later, Hugh Hefner founded *Playboy Magazine*. It makes a person wonder: Could the pornographic revolution of the second half of the twentieth century be some kind of diabolic response to the proclamation of the Assumption? It's certainly curious that the modern pornographic degradation of women's bodies began so soon after the most glorious elevation of the female body in history. The devil's enmity has always been against "the woman" (see Gen 3, Rev 12). Christ lifts her up and the enemy attempts to pull her down.

Saint John Paul II observed that in “the face of the ... debasement to which modern society frequently subjects the female body, the mystery of the assumption proclaims the supernatural destiny and dignity of every human body. ... By looking at [Mary], the Christian learns to discover the value of his own body” (address, July 9, 1997). Mary, glorified in body and soul, show us who we are!