

Gospel: Luke 1:39-56

Mary set out
and traveled to the hill country in haste
to a town of Judah,
where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the infant leaped in her womb,
and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,
cried out in a loud voice and said,
"Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears,
the infant in my womb leaped for joy.
Blessed are you who believed
that what was spoken to you by the Lord
would be fulfilled."

And Mary said:

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
and has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children forever."

Mary remained with her about three months

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and then returned to her home.

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At his homily last year for World Youth Day, Pope Francis said these words:

"When Mary said, 'The mighty one has done great things for me.' she meant to say that these great things are not over, but still happening in the present."

It's not about the distant past; being mindful of the past does not mean being nostalgic and remaining attached to a certain period of history, but rather being able to acknowledge where we've come from so that we can keep going back to the essentials and throw ourselves with creative fidelity into building the future. I think Pope Francis' words beautifully help us begin to unpack the significance of this ancient feast day of the Assumption of Mary.

In our second reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul reflects on the reality of death—the one inevitable fact of life—none of us are going to escape death. When I was a kid, my dad owned a display company and he had one of his carpenters at the shop make a bulletin board for me when I entered the Jesuits and the words were "Memento" on that. It's short for: *memento mori*—remember, you will die.

I put various things on that bulletin board over the years, but for the last couple decades it's become for me a place where I put memorial cards of loved ones who have died. It's in my bathroom next to my mirror. Jesuits always have little memorial cards; all of us usually have some kind of memorial card when we die. I've taken to putting those up on the bulletin board until the board is so filled then I start to take them down as more and more friends go home to God.

I remember my mom saying that as she got older she had more friends in heaven than she did on earth. The reality, as we age, is that we become more conscious of the inevitability of death. This feast day, the Assumption of Mary, confronts that reality and asks the question, "What happens after we die?" We who believe in the resurrection of Jesus, assert with great fidelity that death is not the end, that life is only changed. Again, Paul in his letter to the Corinthians said that the Christ is the first fruit; he has been raised from the dead but those who believe in Him will follow.

Christ is the new Adam; Mary is the new Eve and so this feast of the Assumption is a promise for all of us that as Christ has been raised from the dead we believe that Mary has been raised from the dead and we too hope one day that we will be raised. That's our faith.

We might say that there are four great dogmas of faith about the Blessed mother; four solemn declarations. The first is scriptural, that Mary conceived Jesus as a virgin. No Christian disputes that. The second comes from the Council of Ephesus in the year 431, that Mary was declared to be the mother of God: *Theotokos*, *Theo* meaning 'God' and *tokos*, meaning 'to bring forth;'

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Mother of God. Mother not only of the Christ; Mother of God. The third great Marian declaration was in 1854 by Pius IX, that Mary was immaculately conceived. Now that one is controversial among Christians isn't it? But it was affirmed by Mary's apparition at Lourdes just a few years later.

The most recent dogma of the Catholic Church was declared on November 1, 1950—that was 68 years ago—I remember that because that's the year I was born. 68 years ago, Pius XII (in his apostolic Constitution) declared the Assumption of Mary in these words:

"By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority we pronounce, declare and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma that 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 is an example of what Cardinal Newman would call, "the development of dogma." We reflect on the truths of the faith; we reflect on the Scriptures and we say, "What are their significance for us?" Our Protestant brothers and sisters may say, "Well where is that in Scripture?" You're not going to find exactly the Assumption of Mary in the Scripture, but as you reflect on these texts of the book of Revelation that we heard; as we reflect on this second reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians and in our gospel text—and other texts within the Scriptures—the ancient traditions of the church start to come alive.

Let's remember that we didn't have a Bible until the fourth century; the great Christological declarations weren't defined as matters of faith until the fourth century; the Catholic church has continued to define these matters of faith just as it has done throughout the centuries. The origins and the teachings of the Assumption actually date back as early as the fifth century. This was established as a feast day by the Emperor Maris around the year 600. So Pius XII declaring the dogma of the Assumption in 1950 is hardly pulling this out of the air. It goes back to the ancient traditions of the church.

St. John Damascene—or St. John who was from Damascus in Syria, later living in Jerusalem—is called the Doctor of the Assumption, because he was the first to write with compelling evidence of this dogma (or this truth) of the Assumption. He lived in the eighth century but he referred back to texts in the fifth century (300 years earlier). This is what he wrote: St. Juvenal, the Bishop of Jerusalem at the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451, made known to the Emperor Marcian and his wife, St. Pulcheria, who wished to possess the body of the Mother of God, that Mary died in the presence of all the Apostles, but that her tomb—when opened at the request of St. Thomas—was found empty. From this, the Apostles concluded that the body had been taken up into heaven. That's the oldest authoritative texts that we have referring to this Assumption of Mary.

What's its significance for us today? Pope Francis says we don't study history just to study history, it has significance to us today. It compels us and it's a challenge for us in terms of how we live our lives. This Assumption of Mary is a declaration that death is not the end for us, it is a

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promise of more joy; more joy than we can imagine. Not just our souls, but our bodies—like Christ—will one day be glorified; where Jesus has gone, we hope to follow. Mary is the promise of that: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Can we say that about how God is acting in our lives as well? Can we look into our lives and sense the presence of God guiding us and directing us? That's the challenge of today's feast day.

The resurrection of the body was declared as part of our faith in the Nicene Creed as early as the year 325. It was affirmed again in the Apostles Creed in the year 341; dating back to the fourth century. Mary who is, "full of grace," said the Angel Gabriel when appearing to her; Mary who is "full of grace," is the first to experience this joy of the resurrection. This is our promise as well.

One of the things that has tremendous significance for me have been the Marian apparitions throughout the centuries. National Geographic did an issue (which you can access online from June of 2015) and over the 2000 years of Christian history, there are over 450 reported Marian apparitions. 28 of those apparitions have been approved by local bishops. 16 of those apparitions been approved by the Vatican. Many of those are very familiar to us, but I just want to talk about one today in conclusion. That is the apparition of Our Lady to Juan Diego in the year 1531.

Our first reading today is from the Book of Revelation—the Marian apparition at Guadalupe has echoes of that Book of Revelation of this promise, of Mary clothed with the sun, standing on the moon, the stars around her head. This is a tremendous gift where Mary says, "I am here for you." She is the visible sign of our hope. The Assumption of Mary allows Mary to be present to us throughout the centuries in radically different cultures saying over and over again, "I am praying for you. I am with you. Come with me to Jesus as your Lord."

Let me conclude with these words that Mary spoke to Juan Diego way back in 1531; which she says to us today:

"Know for certain that I am the perfect and perpetual Virgin Mary, the mother of the true God. Here I will show all my love, my compassion, my help and protection to the people. I am your merciful mother, the mother of all who love me, of those who cry to me, of those who have confidence in me.

I will hear their weeping and their sorrows; their necessities and misfortunes; listen and let it penetrate your heart. Do not be troubled or weighed down with grief. Do not fear any illness or vexation; anxiety or pain. Am I not here who am your mother? Are you not under the shadow of my protection? Am I not your fountain of life? Are you not in the folds of the mantles of my garment and the crossing of my arms. Is there anything else you need?

Amen? Amen.