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All agree that whether Mary died or not, when the time came for her life on earth to end, she was taken body as well as soul into heavenly glory.

Some thoughts on the Assumption of Mary

By Germain Grisez

■ The dogma of Mary's assumption was solemnly defined by Pius XII, 1 November 1950. The formula of definition has a beautiful setting in the Apostolic Constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus* (English translation, *Catholic Mind*, 49 [1951], 65-78). In this document, Pope Pius clearly articulates the grounds in faith of this doctrine and the witnesses of faith to it down through the centuries. Then he defines: "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." The meaning of this formula is that Mary is not dead but alive. She lives a bodily life of the same sort that our risen Lord Jesus lives and that we hope eventually to live.

The doctrine does not settle the question whether Mary ever died. Some faith-

ful Christians have believed that she did, thus to be like Jesus in suffering death. But faith teaches that had our first parents not sinned, human persons would not have died. All of us must expect to die only because we are involved in original sin.

Thus, other fanciful Christians believe that Mary, being immaculately conceived—that is, preserved from all stain of sin from the first moment of her being—need not have suffered death. No doubt, she would have been ready to die with Jesus.

But if she did, her death has remained unknown. It is hard to see how such a hidden death would have been of any benefit to humankind. As for God, he hates death and desires it for no one (see Wis. 1:13). Why would he have permitted Mary to die, though she was in no way involved in the sin which incurred death?

Because some faithful Christians doubt that Mary died, the definition of the Assumption carefully leaves it open for us to take either of the two views.

But while some believe Mary died, the reasons why others deny this—the origin of death in sin and Mary's freedom from sin—have led most Christians down the centuries to refuse to think that God allowed Mary to remain dead for long or allowed her body to undergo decay. Thus, all agreed that whether Mary died or not, when the time came for her life on earth to end, she was taken body as well as soul into heavenly glory.

Although we accept this doctrine by faith, many considerations drawn from other truths of faith point to its truth. One of the strongest already has been mentioned: Mary's freedom from the sin by which humankind incurred death.

Mary lives a bodily life

Another consideration is the intimate relationship Mary enjoys with Jesus. Eve, the first woman and mother of all of us, shared in the calamity of Adam's sin and the fall of humankind at the beginning. Similarly, Mary shares intimately in Jesus' redemptive act, becomes our Blessed Mother, and so fittingly accompanies our risen Lord before us into that everlasting life he won for us.

Moreover, Jesus surely honors and loves his mother. Would a good son, able to save his mother from death and enjoy her bodily company, not do so? Hardly. Thus, just as God by a unique grace prepared Mary to be Jesus' mother by preserving her from all sin, so Jesus, having triumphed over death, surely prevented death from spoiling Mary's pure, beautiful, beloved body.

Mary's assumption, the Catholic doc-



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trine concerning it, and Pope Pius' solemn definition of this doctrine have several important implications for us today.

Mary's assumption is the first fruits among human persons of the victory over death Jesus won for all humankind. When we picture her already bodily with Jesus, our hope is enlivened for our own resurrection, and for that of our friends and family. One day we shall meet and embrace Jesus and Mary. We hope on that day also to meet and embrace all our loved ones.

Moreover, the reality of Mary's



assumption—considered together with the reality of Jesus' resurrection and our own hope of resurrection—points up the significance of human bodiliness. Our bodies belong to God's good creation. They are not merely things we have and use. We human persons are bodily.

Our bodies are destined to last forever in glory or in misery. Because we are called to glory, our flesh is sacred. It deserves reverence. Attacks upon the human body and sexual sins which abuse it violate personal reality, for the body is personal.

We are tempted to regard our bodies as something inferior to our spiritual selves, as mere instruments, even as inherently dirty. Then we are tempted to think that violations of our bodies, by acts of violence or by sexual sins, are not very important. But that is a serious error.

Every act of violence against the body of an innocent person is a serious crime against that person. And when we sin sexually, our bodies are not the cause of the sin. Rather, we sin against our own bodies, as St. Paul teaches (1 Cor. 6:18). Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, for by our baptism the Spirit dwells in us together with the Father and the Word. We are called to glorify God in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:20), not despite them.

The doctrine of Mary's assumption underlines the realism of the resurrection for which we hope. Some today find it hard to believe that our own bodies really will come back to life. Some say: "It would make no difference to our faith if Jesus' corpse were found buried somewhere in Palestine." They think it easier to believe in a merely spiritual survival. They claim that traditional faith in resurrection means no more than that.

But the doctrine of Mary's assumption clarifies what we hope for. She is neither dead nor living in some ghostly existence. Rather, she lives a bodily life now.

Those who think it easier to believe in something less than real bodily resurrection ignore what makes anything credible. It is not agreement with our experience, much of which is humanly miserable and repugnant. Nor is it intellectual clarity and cogency, for we believe many mysterious things. No, what makes anything credible is what it promises.

Bodily resurrection and reunion with Jesus, Mary, and our loved ones is worth believing, even worth dying for. Anything less might appeal to a few intellectuals but offers little to people of common sense.

In the Old Testament, before the People of God unfolded the hope of bodily resurrection, they supposed that the dead go down to Sheol, a place of shadowy existence (see Isa. 14:9-11). No

one wanted to die and go to Sheol (see Ps. 88:4-13). Yet some today think it progress to replace the resurrection of Christian hope with something like Sheol.

The doctrine of the assumption of Mary teaches another important lesson. It is nowhere explicitly taught in the Bible. Rather, it is implied in the truths of faith to which the Bible bears witness. Tradition has unfolded this truth. Not everything we believe can be found in Scripture. The Church's faith lives and grows; its certainty does not depend entirely on the Bible (see *Dei verbum*, 9).

The solemn definition by Pius XII of the doctrine of the assumption also fits with and supports Catholic teaching concerning the infallibility of the pope. Without being defined by any council, Mary's assumption was believed by the entire Church. Many bishops, religious communities, and so on, asked the popes over many decades to solemnly define this doctrine.

Our rising is foreshadowed

Finally, on 1 May 1946, Pope Pius sent a letter to all the bishops throughout the world, asking whether they and their people believed this doctrine and thought it should be defined. Almost all answered yes to both questions.

In doing so, they not only testified to their belief that Mary lives now in glory but also to their belief that the pope can infallibly define truths of faith. For no one advises anyone to do the impossible, and so when all the bishops of the world told Pope Pius to define this doctrine, they clearly believed he could do it.

Yet many today deny that popes have this authority. In denying this they show that they have separated themselves from the Catholic Church, which as a unified whole manifested its faith in papal infallibility so recently and in such a clear way. ■

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