

The Assumption



The Assumption

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TEACHER BACKGROUND

The Assumption of Mary

How does Mary share in the glory of Christ?

On 1 November 1950, Pope Pius XII solemnly defined the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary:

...by the authority of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and 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.

Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* November 1, 1950.

The essential point of this definition is that Mary was taken 'body and soul' into heaven when her earthly life had come to an end. What happened and how it happened is unknown. As with Jesus' resurrection, where no one actually saw him rise from the dead, so there were no witnesses of the event of Mary's assumption. But that Jesus was raised in his body, and that Mary, too, shares in his victory in a bodily way is part of Catholic faith.

What the doctrine teaches is quite clear. Although the definition does not explicitly mention that Mary died, it can be safely presumed that she did. What the dogma is telling us is that death was not the end for Mary. She has passed to a new form of life. She has reached the fulfilment of human perfection promised by Christ to those who follow him and do God's will. In other words, Mary is **now** alive and well and enjoying life with God.

Although the terms 'body' and 'soul' are no longer very fashionable today, it is not difficult to understand what the definition was intending to say. By using those terms, the dogma was stressing that Mary in her entirety - the whole of the person who was Mary on earth, body and soul - now still exists. The dogma insists that she is a real, bodily person existing in a definite place called heaven (even though we don't know much about it).

Thus Mary is still a **real person**. She is not just an historical memory recorded in the gospels. She is still alive and real. It is possible to relate to her as to a real concrete person, not just a memory. Moreover, she is still the **same person** as she was on earth. The Mary whom we may relate to and pray to today is the same as the Mary we meet when we read the gospels.

What does the dogma of the Assumption of Mary also tell us?

It is the Christian hope that there is life for all beyond the grave. Christians believe that death is not the end. They place their trust in Christ's promises that all will eventually join him in a resurrected life of glory and happiness in which death is no longer possible (cf. John 11:25-26; 17:24). Mary is the living proof that these promises are not empty, that faith in Christ is well-founded.

Moreover, by emphasising that Mary now enjoys a bodily life, the Church teaches that the body is an integral part of the person. So if there is to be a state of fulfilment which is the human destiny, it must include the body.

Finally, it should be noted that belief in the assumption of Mary also affirms the essential goodness of the whole human person. The dogma of the assumption gives weight to the healthy appreciation of the body as an integral part of what it means to be a human being.

From 'Mary – The First Disciple' Volume 40 of *Understanding Faith* (Australian Edition) National Centre for Religious Studies, Auckland, 1995, pages 25-26.

Some History

The Assumption is the oldest feast day of Our Lady, but we don't know how it first came to be celebrated. Its origin is lost in those days when Jerusalem was restored as a sacred city, at the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine (c.285 - 337). By then it had been a pagan city for two centuries, ever since Emperor Hadrian (76-138) had levelled it around the year 135 and rebuilt it as "Aelia Capitolina" in honor of Jupiter. For 200 years, every memory of Jesus was obliterated from the city, and the sites made holy by his life, death and resurrection became pagan temples.

After the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 336, the sacred sites began to be restored and memories of the life of Our Lord began to be celebrated by the people of Jerusalem. One of the memories about his mother centered around the "Tomb of Mary," close to Mount Zion, where the early Christian community had lived.

On the hill itself was the "Place of Dormition," the spot of Mary's "falling asleep," where she had died. The "Tomb of Mary" was where she was buried. At the time, the "Memory of Mary" was being celebrated. Later it was to become our feast of the Assumption. For a time, the "Memory of Mary" was marked only in Palestine, but then it was extended by the emperor to all the churches of the East. In the seventh century, it began to be celebrated in Rome under the title of the "Falling Asleep (*Dormitio*) of the Mother of God." Soon the name was changed to the "Assumption of Mary," since there was more to the feast than her dying. It also proclaimed that she had been taken up, body and soul, into heaven.

That belief was ancient, dating back to the apostles themselves. What was clear from the beginning was that there were no relics of Mary to be venerated, and that an empty tomb stood on the edge of Jerusalem near the site of her death. That location also soon became a place of pilgrimage. (Today, the Benedictine Abbey of the Dormition of Mary stands on the spot).

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, when bishops from throughout the Mediterranean world gathered in Constantinople, Emperor Marcian asked the Patriarch of Jerusalem to bring the relics of Mary to Constantinople to be enshrined in the capitol. The patriarch explained to the emperor that there were no relics of Mary in Jerusalem, that "Mary had died in the presence of the apostles; but her tomb, when opened later...was found empty and so the apostles concluded that the body was taken up into heaven."

In the eighth century, St. John Damascene was known for giving sermons at the holy places in Jerusalem. At the Tomb of Mary, he expressed the belief of the Church on the meaning of the feast: "Although the body was duly buried, it did not remain in the state of death, neither

was it dissolved by decay.... You were transferred to your heavenly home, O Lady, Queen and Mother of God in truth”.

All the feast days of Mary mark the great mysteries of her life and her part in the work of redemption. The central mystery of her life and person is her divine motherhood, celebrated both at Christmas and a week later (Jan 1) on the feast of the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. The Immaculate Conception (Dec 8) marks the preparation for that motherhood, so that she had the fullness of grace from the first moment of her existence, completely untouched by sin. Her whole being throbbed with divine life from the very beginning, readying her for the exalted role of mother of the Saviour.

The Assumption completes God’s work in her since it was not fitting that the flesh that had given life to God himself should ever undergo corruption. The Assumption is God’s crowning of his work as Mary ends her earthly life and enters eternity. The feast turns our eyes in that direction, where we will follow when our earthly life is over.

The feast days of the Church are not just the commemoration of historical events; they do not look only to the past. They look to the present and to the future and give us an insight into our own relationship with God. The Assumption looks to eternity and gives us hope that we, too, will follow Our Lady when our life is ended.

The prayer for the feast reads: “All-powerful and ever-living God: You raised the sinless Virgin Mary, mother of your son, body and soul, to the glory of heaven. May we see heaven as our final goal and come to share her glory.”

In 1950, in the apostolic Constitution ‘Munificentissimus Deus’, Pope Pius XII proclaimed the Assumption of Mary a dogma of the Catholic Church in these words: “The Immaculate Mother of God, the ever-virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heaven.” With that, an ancient belief became Catholic doctrine and the Assumption was declared a truth revealed by God.

Father Clifford Stevens © Eternal Word Television Network
[The Assumption of Mary: A Belief Since Apostolic Times | EWTN](#)

A Sign of What We Can Become

Psalm 16 sings, “You will not allow the one you love to see the pit; you will reveal the path of life to me, give me unbounded joy in your presence.” Those whom God loves, the psalm promises, will be raised up above the thousand daily deaths that come into every life. When we raise our hearts and souls to God, the things that drag us down will lose their grip on us. When we refuse to become imprisoned by things and status and ambition and self and greed, our souls are set free and our bodies are unburdened. Life becomes liveable again. Enough becomes enough. God becomes God again.

But where can we possibly go to find someone whose life is not tethered to the earth to the point of death? What proof do we have that anyone can rise above what we want to what we can become? The answer surely is Mary of the Assumption whose love of God lifted her far above the goals and gains of those who had never really seen the Christ for what he was, because their mind’s eye was taken up totally with what they were themselves.

Mary of the Assumption teaches us to keep our eyes on the things of heaven; to free ourselves from the fetters of anything lesser; to develop a vision outside of ourselves; and to allow ourselves to be lifted up beyond the petty and the transient to the eternal and the unalloyed. Mary of the Assumption is a sign of what we can become if we are willing to let go of what we have planned for ourselves.

—from *In Pursuit of Peace: Praying the Rosary Through the Psalms*, by Joan Chittister
[A sign of what we can become | Joan Chittister](#)

What are we to assume about the Assumption?

The current issue of *Our Sunday Visitor*, that still point at the whirling universe of church publications, reminds its readers that the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is rising like a midsummer moon over the calendar pages. They urge them to celebrate this commemoration of the direct assumption of Mary, body and soul, into Heaven. This really happened, the church is said to teach, as a fulfillment of Mary's remaining both sinless all her life and a virgin after giving birth to the Savior.

You have to hand it to this traditional newspaper whose publishers include a mild theological disclaimer to the effect that we do not know how this event took place. In short, that it is a Mystery. Their note is both a bow to modern thinking and a credit to the editors who understand that their readers want encouragement in their faith rather than complex theological discourses. These Catholics sit neither on the Far Right nor the Far Left but occupy the middle pews of the contemporary Church.

This feast has warm associations in many Catholic traditions in which it has accented the wonder and mystery, the sacramentality we might say, of midsummer. With an eye on their ripening fields the Irish knew it as Lady's Day in August and Americans, with an eye on their seaside holidays, found spiritual renewal in getting into the water on that day. It is as if such customs recognized that the Mystery of the Feast spoke mysteriously and deeply to believers who were moved by its symbolism rather than its historical character.

While *Our Sunday Visitor's* column reassures Catholics that the early Church Fathers held this miraculous happening as true and that the church has always taught it to the faithful. While "The church has always taught this" is a powerful argument, it begs the question of the mode and manner as well as the meaning of Mary's journey to Heaven.

The Assumption invites us to tap into the vein of rich spiritual ore that runs just beneath the surface of a teaching that is radically diminished when it is presented literally as if by a reporter breathlessly describing the launch of a space vehicle from Cape Canaveral, "We have lift-off."

Was it an accident of history or a powerfully symbolic underscoring of the relevance of this teaching that Pope Pius XII proclaimed it in 1950 at the very heart of the tumultuous twentieth century? Graham Greene drew on his novelist's sensitivity to symbol in an essay in then newsstand dominant *LIFE* magazine. After two World Wars and the Holocaust, among other horrors of the first half of the century, the pope was responding to the worldwide need for a reaffirmation of the dignity of the human body and the sacredness of human personality. Greene understood that the real meaning of the Assumption was found not in tightly bound literalism but in the overflow of a Mystery that, as a mother would have it, concerned us as much as her.

While some Protestants pulled back from the declaration as hardly conducive to ecumenical relations, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung considered it the most important religious declaration of the twentieth

century. As a master of the mythological river that nourished what he termed our “collective unconscious,” Jung grasped the profound and fitting symbolism of such a declaration at mid-century. The world had already turned its attention toward the endless vistas and wonder of space and astronauts would leave boot marks on the moon’s surface a generation later. The Swiss scholar sensed that the Assumption symbolized the mystery of human destiny and the end of the pre-Copernican era at the same time. The Assumption was a mythological and therefore a spiritual symbol of a Mystery in which we are still caught up. There was another numinous layer beyond the celebration of Mary and the confirmation of human dignity.

The Assumption proclaimed the Mystery of the century, the return of Mother Earth to the Heavens and the end, therefore, of the split between Earth and Heaven and all the divisions, such as between flesh and spirit, that flowed from that. It heralded the unity of the universe and the unity of human personality. That is the richest and perhaps least plumbed aspect of this feast. The wonder is that the Assumption is rich and deep enough a Mystery to accommodate these various levels of understanding all at the same time. Midsummer allows us to savor its Mystery in many ways and to understand how much we lose when we limit our religious understanding only to the concrete literal level.

Eugene Cullen Kennedy

<https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/bulletins-human-side/what-are-we-assume-about-assumption>

The Divine Feminine Assumes Her Place

The middle of August symbolizes the beginning of the end of summer to most persons in culturally Protestant America. Children are returning to school; adults are returning to work. Summer vacation is coming to an end. It is a slightly different story in much of Europe, where August—the entire month—is still devoted to vacation. August 15, the very middle of this most languid of summer months (the one that takes its name from a legendary Roman emperor) has significant additional religious resonance.

In Greek it is known as the *Panagia*, the All-Holy Mary’s day, a religious holiday second in significance only to Easter. In Italian it is called Ferragosto, the August Festival. It is the feast of the assumption of a woman who is still remembered somewhat ironically as “the Virgin.” Of all the trappings of medieval Christendom with which the Protestant Reformers dispensed, none were erased in more thoroughgoing fashion than the celebration of the emphatically bodily femininity of Jesus’ mother.

The Most Intense Kind of Poetry

Just as she was deemed to be a human being like no other, and thereby worthy of bearing the body of God, so too Mary is believed to have died like none other. That is why the Catholic and Eastern churches refer to her Assumption (or else to her sleeping, the so-called Dormition), not her death. Mary, it is believed, was “assumed body and soul into heaven,” in the words of this week’s holiday meditation in *L’Osservatore Romano*, dated August 11.

The way the Catholic hierarchy describes this miracle is really rather moving, speaking as it does to the profound intimacy between a Mother and her Son, a female intimacy that is more movingly and emphatically described than any other female relation of this single Savior.

Using the surprisingly familial language of orthodox Christian theology, the idea in play here is that God the Father cared as deeply for the Mother as for the Son; if Jesus’ body was “not allow[ed]... to undergo corruption,” then Mary’s would not be either. Both were assumed directly into heaven, body and soul. “To penetrate into this mystery,” the meditation suggests, “we have need of a divine revelation and the most intense kind of poetry.”

This, they are quick to add, is just what we find in the Christian scriptures. Not just revelation, but intense poetry. Everything of importance this week comes in allegory. So Mary’s body when carrying

the Christ to term ("pregnant with the Word," as they put it) is a form of the Ark of the Covenant before which David danced the fool for joy. Mary's body, when assumed directly into heaven, "is the image of the future God intends for us" all. And the Mother Church? Well, Mary just is her image, lovely and enduring. The newspaper goes on to perform a surprising mini-lesson in art history, analyzing two famous images of the Assumption, one by Matteo di Giovanni (1474) and another by Raphael of Urbino (1502-1504), as well as one modern icon of the Dormition, by Theophanes (1932).

That, it would seem, is the key to this sacro-secular women's holiday: images, and poetry.

A Piece of Counter-Reformation

To read the scriptures merely as a history lesson, or as a treatise on godly governance, would be to miss the better half of their power to illuminate. The artistry is all. And thus to fail to supplement such textual treasures with visual ones would be to hamstring the processes of spiritual insight and care.

This may all seem very foreign to the vaguely aniconic and sometimes unpoetic culture of Protestantism. The contemporary Catholic Church seems to place emphatic importance on this distinction; it is as if Mary is an uncorrupted piece of Counter-Reformation.

But there is something else of note in this holiday: it is the elevation of the divine feminine to a position, not just of importance, but of absolute prominence. It is this stunning presence of shimmering femininity, body and soul conjoined, that makes the exclusive maleness of the priesthood hardest for many Protestants to understand. How to embrace and exclude femininity at the same time? As modern feminists have the patience to show, that paradox (or rather, deep cultural contradiction) is pervasive, not belonging to a single confession or creed.

It is in this sense that the presence, or the absence, of Mary has many things to say, not just about theology, but about the cultures such theologies produce. Yet the vehicles needed to communicate them are poetic and painterly as much as anything else. The arts are the languages in which such holidays speak.

Louis A. Ruprecht

[The Divine Feminine Assumes Her Place | Religion Dispatches](#)

YouTube Videos

Benedictine sister, Joan Chittester preaches on the Assumption:

[08152017 Assumption - YouTube](#)

Biblical scholar Scott Hahn on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary:

[Scott Hahn on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary - YouTube](#)

Robert Barron explains the concept of the Queenship of Mary:

[Bishop Barron on The Queenship of Mary - YouTube](#)

Images of Mary...Some Thoughts



The image of the Assumption by Murillo on the cover of this booklet, the image to the left by El Greco and the painting by Titian on page 30 are among the most famous images of the Assumption in western art.

Using such images can be problematic in schools but it is possible to recontextualise them by exploring the motivation of the artist and the human longing that these images reveal; it is a question of how they are spoken about with students. Intelligent questioning is crucial.

It is also possible that students could reimagine such images. For example, they could show Mary surrounded not by cherubs, but by modern men and women, especially those who are suffering or are marginalised. This kind of reimagining opens up the idea of Mary as 'truly our sister', and not simply Mother and Queen. (See Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* February 2, 1974.)

For copyright reasons, it is not possible to provide modern images of the Assumption. Teachers are urged to explore the work of Mickey McGrath, and Robert Lentz. Their work, along with other modern and recontextualised images can be found at the following link: [Trinity Stores |](#)

El Greco, 'Assumption of the Virgin' (Public Domain). Accessed via Wikimedia Commons:
[File:Domenikos Theotokópoulos, called El Greco - The Assumption of the Virgin - Google Art Project.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)

STAFF PRAYER

The following Prayer Ritual was prepared by Education Officers from Brisbane Catholic Education. A PDF suitable for printing is available at [this link](#).

Outline

We Gather: Welcome, Sign of the Cross, Lighting of Candles, Gathering Song, Opening Prayer

We Listen: Scripture Reading, A Paraphrase, Sharing

We Respond: Intercessions, Closing Prayer

We Go Forth: Blessing, Dismissal, Sign of Peace

The Space

Ideally, set out chairs around a prayer focus – creating a space where people can be present to one another. Three candles are placed near the Bible which rests open at the Scripture Reading for today.

You will need:

- Leader; First Reader (who will read from the Bible); Second Reader for the Paraphrased reading; Five Readers for the Intercessions; A person to light the prayer candles at the beginning of prayer
- Three candles (head, heart and hands) and matches
- Bible (open at the Reading) on a small table
- Handouts for each staff member
- Full text of the ritual for the Leader
- CD or stream of song, player or speaker and a person to organise the music at the appropriate time
- Song words for each participant with copyright appropriately acknowledged



The Assumption of Mary

We Gather

Welcome and Introduction

Leader: This week, we affirm our belief that Mary is now in Heaven.

This feast of Mary originated in a sixth century feast of the Dormition or 'Falling asleep of Mary'. By the seventh century the feast became known as the Assumption of Mary. The date of this feast commemorated a very ancient harvest festival towards the end of summer, which gave thanks to the Earth Mother for her fertility in producing the harvest. The feast of the Assumption commemorates the glorification of Mary, chosen by God, to be the mother of Jesus the Christ. The feast acquired a special status as a feast of Mary when Pius XII in 1950 defined the assumption as a dogma of faith. On this feast we are encouraged to affirm our humanity and work to enhance the dignity of people as daughters and sons of God.

(From *Stories and Seasons: Saints and Feasts for Catholic Schools and Parishes* by Kevin Treston)

Sign of the Cross

Leader: Mary accepted God wholeheartedly into her life. Let us open ourselves to God through the Sign of the Trinity who dwells within us.

All: In the name of the Father, + and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

A person lights the three Candles as the group sing the Song ...

Song Leader: Let us invite God to fill our hearts as completely as Mary did, as we sing:

All sing ONE of the following songs:

My Soul Is Joyful (Frank Andersen – from Eagle's Wings)

The Magnificat (Peter Kearney - #52 in As One Voice 1)

O Holy Mary (Owen Allstott - #141 in As One Voice 1)

I Say "Yes" My Lord (Donna Pena - #155 in As One Voice 1)

Be It Done to Me (Bob Hurd - #119 in As One Voice 1)

Image: *Virgin and Child Against Blue Sky* photo by David Papillon via Unsplash.
Free to use under the Unsplash license. <https://unsplash.com/photos/T7Z-C7gQN00>

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Almighty Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have revealed the beauty of your power by exalting the lowly virgin of Nazareth and making her the mother of our Saviour. May the prayers of this woman clothed with the sun bring Jesus to the waiting world and fill the void of incompleteness with the presence of her child, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

We Listen

Scripture Reading

Reader 1: A reading from the gospel of Luke (1:46-55)

Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors. to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

SHORT PAUSE ...

A Paraphrase

Reader 2: A Magnificat of Waiting ...

My soul reflects quietly on your fullness, and my spirit grows stronger in the hope of your promise, God my redeemer, because you have filled me with the knowing that you are alive within me.

Yes, day by day through the course of time my awareness of the call to blessed fulfillment increases for you have done great things in me.

Holy is this time, and patience is your gift to all who nurture the seed of your love.

You have changed my life; I was so confident in my unknowing.

You have deflected my fervent thrust toward iron-clad goals and spread before me your vision of fragile simplicity.

My longing to be a healing and reconciling person to your people is affirmed within the daily comings and goings of my life; my illusions of my own wholeness are mercifully revealed.

You are here now in this seeming emptiness of waiting, remembering your intent, ... according to the promise made in the beginning of time ... remembering your intent to reach through the work of my life that your fullness may be known now, in our time.

(From Ann Johnson *Miryam of Nazareth - Woman of Strength and Wisdom* Ave Maria Press Notre Dame Indiana, 1984, 79-80)

Sharing Leader: What speaks to you from a word or a line in either of these Readings?

People may like to share for a few minutes ...

We Respond

Intercessions

Leader: God, our Wisdom, Source of our Peace, your true disciple is the one who listens to your Word. Hear us as we pray:

All: Our souls proclaim the greatness of God!

Reader 3: May the leaders of our Church show us by their word and example that God is to be praised in all we do ...

All: The Almighty has done great things for us!

Reader 4: May we work to ensure that the gifts of creation are more evenly distributed among the peoples of the earth ...

All: God's mercy reaches from age to age!

Reader 5: May we reflect your mercy through our work of reconciliation between black and white Australia and in the welcome we give to refugees who come to our shores ...

All: The hungry God has filled with good things!

Reader 6: May the bread of Christ, broken for a better world, bring together all those estranged or divided in the name of religion, so that together we may share in the feast which God has prepared for the hungry.

All: With Mary, we rejoice in God our Saviour!

Reader 7: We offer the prayers we hold in the silence of our hearts ... *PAUSE* ...

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Empowering God, Inspire us by the example of Mary's openness to your Love. May we live in this attitude and bring to birth a new world! We make our prayer through Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We Go Forth

Blessing

Leader: May God do great things in us and enrich us with abundant blessings.

All: Amen.

Leader: May God's mercy reach out to all we meet.

All: Amen.

Leader: May we be filled with the joys of the Spirit and the gifts of our eternal home.

All: Amen.

Leader: May almighty God bless us, the Father, and the Son, + and the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Leader: Go forth to proclaim the greatness of God in all you do today.

All: Thanks be to God!

Leader: Let us show our joy as we offer one another a Sign of Peace.



Image: *Silhouette of Virgin Mary Statue* photo by Alex Gindin via Unsplash.
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