

**Feast of the Assumption
August 15, 1999**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Revelation 11:19a; 12:6a, 10ab
1 Corinthians 15:20-27
Luke 1:39-56**

Jesus is not the only one who has been raised to new life.

Pope Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption on November 1st, 1950 with these words: “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.”

And thus it was that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was formally proclaimed in the Apostolic Constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus*. Now this was not a solitary action of a single pope - but reflected the Church’s nearly two thousand-year-old tradition of devotion to the Mother of God - specifically under the title of her Assumption into heaven. The Pope’s declaration was a confirmation of what popular devotion had held throughout the centuries. One of the earliest feasts commemorating the Mother of God was kept at Antioch about the year 380.

Pope Pius XII’s effort to define and proclaim the dogma of Mary’s Assumption actually began immediately following the second world war in 1946 when the Holy Father petitioned all the bishops of the

world directly and authoritatively to present their opinion to him about Mary’s assumption. He asked two questions of them, “Do you, venerable brethren, in your outstanding wisdom and prudence, judge that the bodily assumption of the Blessed Virgin can be proposed and defined as a dogma of faith? Do you, with your clergy and people desire that it should be?”

It took some four years to compile all of the information gathered. The bishops gave almost unanimous affirmation to both questions. The Second World War had just ended. Millions had perished in this and in the First World War. The horror of Hitler’s death camps was only beginning to be perceived. People the world over were in need of something that would affirm life - life that was lasting. So the Pope turned to what had been a traditional teaching of the Church for centuries, centered on the Mother of Jesus - that she, a human being like us, shared her Son’s bodily resurrection. Even though thousands of petitions had been made to the Pope from all over the world, including those from cardinals, bishops, dioceses, parishes, theologians, and all classes of people, the Pope demonstrated just how the Church works when it comes to defining a dogma. He formally asked these two questions and it took some four years to complete

the study and then define the dogma in 1950.

In the Middle Ages, a popular line of reasoning to prove a point of faith was the argument from appropriateness: "It is appropriate that..." and the theologian would go on to describe what he was about and trying to prove. It was simply appropriate that since Mary shared the sufferings of her Son in this life that she should indeed share his glorification in heaven as well and to the same degree - with her bodily assumption to God's right hand.

For us this is a source of considerable comfort and consolation for it means that Jesus is not the only one who has been raised from the dead...certainly his mother has been. And there may be others as well. Remember the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament - how he was taken up in a fiery chariot? We don't know altogether what that means but that somehow, centuries before the coming of Christ, there was a sense that some folks could be close to God in a special way. And on the day of the Resurrection remember from the gospels the allusion to folks formerly dead who were seen at the time of Christ's death? The point is that life and the life of the spirit are far more complex and mysterious than we can fathom. Mary's assumption helps to confirm that and foreshadow our own place one day with God and with Jesus.

The great psychologist, Carl Jung who proclaimed the spiritual as the essential heart of human life, greeted definition of the Assumption as the greatest religious event in four hundred years. In a time when women were gaining real human freedom in the west - the right to vote, to keep their own earnings even when married, to some level of equal justice in employment - Jung also perceived that the feminine

aspect of human nature in both women and men was being recognized and valued. For him, the image of the woman assumed into the heart of what had seemed an entirely male image of God allowed religion to recognize the feminine in God, as so many great mystics had done. The God, who in Jesus, made friends with women, cuddled children, cared for the sick and refused to reject the sinner was, as long ago the mystic Julian of Norwich said, "a mother". There, at the heart of the divine, is the woman's image, not a visitor, but one for whom this is home. Mary's assumption tells us that in God the fullness of the human is at home, and in that home the fullness of male and female are exalted and accepted into the very being of God, so that we experience divinity itself in a new way.

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