

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

SAINT OF THE DAY

15_08_2020



Confirming a belief deeply-rooted in the hearts of the faithful, on 1 November 1950, Pius XII solemnly defined the dogma of the Assumption of Mary: “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”. These words, spoken at the culmination of the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, enclose all four dogmas concerning Mary, proclaimed by the Church over the centuries and very closely connected with each

other: the **Divine Maternity** (Council of Ephesus, 431), the Perpetual Virginity (Council of Constantinople II, 553), the Immaculate Conception (*Ineffabilis Deus* of Pius IX, 1854) and this, her Assumption in body and soul, which makes Our Lady the highest fruit of the Redemption and a sign of sure hope for the resurrection and glorification in Christ of all the just.

Thus, the body of Mary – preserved from original sin and never fallen even into venial sin – did not rot after the “end of the course of earthly life”[1], but she was taken up in eternal glory, as will happen at the end of time for the bodies of the redeemed, who will be reunited with their souls, which have already passed through the Particular Judgment.

The first explicit evidence of the Church's faith in the Assumption of Mary can be found in the writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373) and St. Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403). But already in the 2nd century theological reflection on the graces and merits of the Blessed Virgin had reached very high peaks with Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, who described in depth Mary's role in the history of salvation, in dependence and union with her Son. Saint Irenaeus in fact presented her as the new Eve, in the wake of the Pauline teaching of Jesus as the new Adam.

Very ancient are also the origins of the feast, which first spread to the East, where it was celebrated at least since the 6th century as “Dormition of the Virgin” (the “Dormition” implies the thesis of a deep sleep, which would have preceded the elevation into heaven). It then took root in the West, thanks in particular to Pope Sergius I (687-701), under whom the *Dormitio* was already among the four major Marian feasts. It was then Leo IV (847-855), when in Rome the feast had meanwhile been renamed the Assumption, which gave it greater solemnity, prescribing a vigil and an octave. The writings of the Fathers, the countless churches dedicated to the Assumption, the sacred images, the ancient liturgical books (from the *Gallican Sacramentary* to the Byzantine texts) show how deeply rooted the faith of Christians in this mystery, the fourth glorious mystery of the Rosary, was from the early centuries.

The Scholastica theologians – above all Saints Albert the Great, Anthony of Padua, and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio – then made a notable contribution to the deepening of the doctrine of the Assumption. Its foundation is in Sacred Scripture, which is full of references to the glories of Mary, from Genesis (Gen 3:15) to the “woman clothed with the sun” of Revelation (Rev 12:1). *Doctor Seraphicus*, in particular, taking his cue from a verse of the Song of Solomon, (*Who is this coming up from the wilderness, Leaning upon her beloved?*) explained that in Paradise the person enjoys the fullness of bliss precisely in the union between body and soul, granted in advance to the glorious Mother of God.

And St Anthony, commenting on a passage from the prophet Isaiah (*I will glorify the place where my feet are laid*), was inspired to write: "The place where the Lord laid His feet was the blessed Virgin, from whom He acquired humanity. This place was glorified by the Lord, exalting Mary above the angelic choirs. From this it is clear that the Virgin was assumed into heaven also with her body, which was the place where the Lord laid His feet".

Thinking of the intimate union between Mother and Son, St Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444) clearly affirmed that "Mary should not be if not where Christ is; moreover, it is reasonable and convenient that the soul and the body should already be glorified in heaven, as of man, as also of woman; finally, the fact that the Church has never sought and proposed to the veneration of the faithful the bodily relics of the Blessed Virgin, provides an argument that can be said almost a discernible proof". Already in the Middle Ages such a consensus had formed in Catholic theology, in parallel with the great popular piety that denying the Assumption would have been a source of scandal.

With the arrival of the 19th century and the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the Holy See began to receive multiple petitions from all parts of Christianity with the prayer to solemnly define the dogma of the Assumption as well. In 1946, Pius XII addressed an encyclical letter to all the bishops, asking what their "wisdom and prudence" and the devotion of the faithful to a dogmatic pronouncement on the Assumption suggested, confirming the importance given to the *sensus fidelium*. The answers obtained were almost unanimously in favour of the definition of the dogma, which was then proclaimed during the Holy Year.

[1] Pius XII did not use the word "death" in the dogmatic definition. Pope Pacelli thus wanted to leave time for theological investigation, in the light of the arguments of the "immortalists" according to which Our Lady was not subject to the power of death, as she had never sinned.