

# Women in the Word

A Project to Restore the Women of Advent

## Reflection on the Assumption

by Judith Davis, PhD

Less controversial than the Immaculate Conception, the dogma of Mary's Assumption states that "having completed the course of her earthly life," Mary was taken up, body and soul, into heaven. The web of tradition giving rise to the dogma, however, is more complex than the traditional basis for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The Assumption is based on a welter of extracanonical texts, some as early as the fifth or sixth century, in a number of different languages, which describe the end of Mary's life as *dormitio* (falling asleep), *transitus* (passing over) or *assumptio* (assumption). There are two principal strands in this web. One strand describes her passing as two events: when Mary dies, her soul is taken to heaven; then, in a later event, her body is assumed separately. The second strand depicts Jesus coming to take her with Him, body and soul together, in a single event. *Munificentissimus Deus* ("Most Bountiful God"), the apostolic constitution that proclaims the dogma of the Assumption, says nothing definitive about whether or not Mary died, or when her body and soul might have been taken up, together or separately.

One early theologian, Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 402) considered three possibilities in light of the silence of Scripture: she died; she was martyred; or she remained alive, "since nothing is impossible with God . . . [and] no one knows her end." Augustine (430) thought that she had died, for even Christ had to die.

The Council of Ephesus (431), proclaimed that because Christ's divine nature was present in his human body, Jesus was fully God as well as fully human; therefore, Mary could truly be called the Mother of God. The second-century extracanonical text known as the *Protevangelium of James* had already established Mary as sinless; the writings of Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) had vouched for her perpetual virginity. As God-bearer (*Theotókos*), the mother of Jesus who rose from the dead, Mary was eminently eligible to be treated as similarly risen from the dead by theologians. In the course of the fifth and sixth centuries separate but similar accounts of her passing and the disposition of her body emerged in both the East—where the account was known as the *Dormition of the Theotókos*—and in the West, where the account was known as *The Passing of Mary*. The oldest text in this latter tradition, the *Transitus Mariae*, was attributed to the second-century Bishop Melito of Sardis (the "Pseudo-Melito"). The Pseudo-Melito text situates Mary's passing in Jerusalem, where she was said to live with the apostle John's parents in their home on Mount Olivet. Some texts, however, both in the East and the West, place her in Bethlehem or Ephesus at the time of her passing. Most of the texts in this tradition contain references to angry Jews who attack her funeral procession; the Jews are miraculously punished and just as miraculously healed after they recognize that Mary is the Mother of God. Some



*There are many feast days for Mary of Nazareth throughout the year. The Church celebrates Mary's Assumption into heaven on August 15. Please use the enclosed educational resource as a reflection for further understanding of this feastday in your parish or small faith community on this day or at another appropriate time.*



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The Assumption of Mary by Frederick J. Brown

elaborations on the assumption narrative in this tradition include Mary's visit to Hell, in a parallel to the extracanonical Gospel of Nicodemus which depicted Christ's deliverance of souls after his crucifixion.

A text known to English speakers as the *The Falling-Asleep* or *The Dormition of the Mother of God* was attributed to St. John the Evangelist ("Pseudo-John") and translated from Greek into a large number of other versions. This text initiates one strand of the tradition that describes her passing in two stages. In this early work (about the end of the fifth century), Mary is praying at the site of Jesus' sepulcher in Jerusalem when the archangel Gabriel comes to her and says that her petition to join her son has been heard. Mary returns to Bethlehem, where the apostle John joins her, followed by a miraculous gathering of the rest of the apostles from far and near and even from beyond the grave. While they are praying and awaiting Jesus, the supernatural aura surrounding them leads crowds of people to the house, where the sick are cured. Jesus comes to take her soul with him; she dies, and Peter and the apostles accompany her body to the tomb. For three days following her burial, angelic voices are heard; at the end of that time, the voices stop, and the apostles realize that Mary's body has been taken to Paradise.

The *Transitus* of Pseudo-Melito differs in some details from Pseudo-John's

*Dormition*, most notably at the end of the narrative when Jesus comes to take Mary's body with him. He commands the archangel Michael to bring Mary's soul to him, and before he returns to heaven, Jesus gives her, body and soul together, to angels to take to paradise. This narrative combines the strands of the dormition tradition and reflects several different versions of the story.

The feast of the Dormition had been accepted and celebrated in the East as early as the fifth or sixth century. During the seventh century, it was established by Pope Theodore (d.649). Leo IV (d. 855) gave the feast of the Assumption, August 15, a vigil and octave. And no matter what position theologians took on the details of Mary's assumption, they emphasized that she continued after her passing to fight heresy, conquer demons, and intercede for humankind.

The earliest appearance of the other strand of tradition is in a homily by the little-known bishop Theoteknos of Livias (d.650), delivered about the end of the sixth century. Citing the examples of Enoch and Elijah, Theoteknos claimed that Mary's body and soul were assumed together into heaven, where she intercedes for all of humankind. His opinion was shared by the eminent John of Damascus (d. ca. 749), who called her death a falling-asleep, a leave-taking, or even an arrival; he described her assumption as an event

that extended her influence over the entire universe.

The development of these traditions suffered a setback. In a letter written under the illustrious name of Jerome (d. 420), but attributed to Paschasius Radbertus (d.865), the author ("Pseudo-Jerome") treated the *Dormition* literature of the East as spurious, stating emphatically that there was no way of knowing how or even whether Mary's body was removed from her tomb. His arguments, and the fact that the letter was written under the name of Jerome, contributed to a hiatus in the consideration of Mary's bodily assumption.

During the Middle Ages, the treatise of Pseudo-Jerome was first challenged, then supplanted by an anonymous twelfth-century treatise whose author cited Genesis 3:19 regarding humankind's return to dust. According to this author, Christ's flesh—taken from Mary's—did not undergo corruption; and Christ preserved Mary's virginity—why could he not will to keep her also from the corruption of death? Abelard (d. 1142) believed that Christ took his own flesh and soul from Mary and would therefore have glorified hers; he would not have left it in the tomb for three days, but immediately took it to paradise. Curiously, in his four sermons on the Assumption, Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) gave no indication of his personal beliefs on Mary's bodily presence in heaven. Amadeus of Lausanne (d. 1159) affirmed the Assumption since through Christ Godhead lived in Mary's body. A thirteenth-century Latin *Life of Mary* used, and lavishly embellished, extracanonical sources for every phase of her earthly existence which ended with her resurrection and assumption to joyful acclamations as "Empress of Heaven."

Albert the Great (d.1280) gave short shrift to Mary's bodily assumption

as a belief of the pious. On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) used the Assumption to indicate that not all doctrines have a basis in Scripture. (Pius XII quoted him to that effect in proclaiming the dogma in 1950). The mystic Gregory Palamas (d. 1359) said that her divine motherhood made Mary worthy of assumption; if saints' deaths are honored, Mary's death merited more, since the saints received their sanctity through her.

Throughout the period of the Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545-63), and its aftermath, reflection on the doctrine of the Assumption dwindled. In the Counter-Reformation and the eighteenth century, Marian doctrine was largely eclipsed by attempts to correct excesses of devotion, but in the nineteenth, Pope Pius IX proclaimed Mary's Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility almost in the same breath. In the twentieth century, as with the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception in the previous century, theological politics played a role in the proclamation of the Assumption.

However, it was an apparition of Mary—this time in 1917 at Fátima, Portugal—that seemed to foster conditions favorable to the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption. From May to October of 1917, Mary is said to have appeared to three Portuguese children. She encouraged them to say the Rosary daily for the conversion of sinners and asked for the consecration of Russia to her. The children were also to promote devotion to her Immaculate Heart and a Communion of reparation on the first Saturday of each month. (Saturday had been "Mary's day" since the early Middle Ages.) World War I, then in progress, would end; but if her requests were not honored, Mary said, there would be a second, more devastating war.

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The Dormition of Mary

In 1939, Pope Pius XII was elected. During his pontificate the world experienced another war and the Holocaust, the spread of Communism, and the Cold War with Russia. At the same time, popular devotion to Mary increased everywhere, with sodalities, novenas, processions, hymns, radio programs and films—as well as Marian academic institutes and societies—reflecting a renaissance of interest in Mary. In 1946 the Pope sent a letter to bishops asking for their assent to the possibility of a dogma on the Assumption, emphasizing the necessity for hope in the ultimate destiny of humankind in light of atheistic Communism. He received near-unanimous assent. In 1950, a Holy Year, Pius issued the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, “Most Bountiful God,” which proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption as a

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divinely revealed truth.

*Munificentissimus Deus* is a much more carefully crafted and conservatively worded document than *Ineffabilis Deus*, the apostolic constitution proclaiming the Immaculate Conception. Pius cited centuries of Church tradition in the form of “sacred books” (their canonical status unspecified), the absence of Marian bodily relics, the proliferation of churches dedicated to the Assumption, the practice of liturgies East and West, and theological writings, including those of Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403) who identified Mary with the Woman of the Apocalypse. Mary’s privilege, Pius said, represented the “goal [for which] our bodies and souls are destined,” and he expressed the hope that “belief in Mary’s bodily Assumption into heaven will make our belief in our own resurrection stronger.”

Aside from reservations about the

lack of scriptural evidence for the Assumption, debates about the dogma and its feast—less frequent and less fraught than those about the Immaculate Conception—have centered on whether or not Mary had died before her body was assumed into heaven. *Munificentissimus Deus* did not say anything definitive about whether or not Mary died, or when her body and soul might have been taken up. Neither have theologians since then, perhaps because there is no plausible way to do so.

The fact that the dogma was issued on the Feast of All Saints, November 1, gives us room for thoughtful consideration of Mary’s place in the Communion of Saints—as one of us, who has gone before us to let us know what the possibilities of faithful discipleship might be. Beyond all dogma, Mary remains, in Elizabeth Johnson’s words, one of the cloud of witnesses, a “friend of God and prophet” and “truly our sister.”

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