

Christopher J. Drennen, O.S.A.

Mary's prayer of praise, the Magnificat rings out loud and clear at evening prayer throughout the Christian world. This hymn speaks to the poor and oppressed in ways that have not been matched since Luke recorded them in today's Gospel. We also echo the prayer of Elizabeth when we pray the Hail Mary and hear singers proclaim the Ave Marie in churches and concert halls. This gospel is among the best-loved and repeated proclamations in all of scripture. Today, the Church uses it to celebrate not the feast of the Visitation that it records, but the Feast of the Assumption of Mary on this holyday.

This feast celebrates Mary's bodily assumption into heaven after her birth. First Corinthians tells us that Jesus' resurrection and ascension were only the first fruits of God's plan for salvation. Someday, at the final judgment, we all shall be resurrected into the new creation, into the new Jerusalem, into God's Kingdom. We Catholics believe that Mary, as a result of her faithfulness and sinlessness received her gift and assumption soon after her death. Eastern Christians refer to this event as the "Dormition" or "falling asleep" of the Virgin. It is an ancient feast and celebration, revered even by Muslims.

Why is this event so important? Why did it take until the 1950's for the Church to declare this ancient belief a dogma of faith? Fifty years ago, the world was recovering from one of the most inhumane experiences of war and destruction that the world had ever seen. The horrors of World War II, and the revelations of the holocaust were followed by the introduction of the terrors of the Atomic blasts over Japan, and the dawn of the nuclear age. What was human life all about? How can Christians believe in a redeemed human race when such fears and lack of hope were all around?

This age gave us the need to see the dignity of all human life despite the evil of the world around us. The church proclaimed as dogma what was already believed to emphasize the importance of the incarnation and the dignity of the human flesh. Mary is the best reminder to us that our God, the Word, took on flesh through the faith of one human woman, Through Mary; we received the gift of salvation of Jesus Christ. Jesus was not a wise spirit that appeared and disappeared as needed. He is truly human. He had a human mother who gave him life. In that marvelous act of incarnation, the human world was changed. God joined us, and in Jesus, He knows the depth of our humanity. In his life and death, he knows about suffering and loss. He knows of pain and rejection. He knows of persecution and rejection and death.

We need to celebrate and remember Mary, the mother of Jesus as our model of faith. In accepting the call of the angel to be the mother of Jesus, she became the first Christian. She was the first to let Christ be born within her, and we follow by saying yes to new life. She was first to learn the teachings and spirit of Jesus, and we follow. She was often confused and lacked the knowledge to understand all that God was showing her, but she always remained faithful. She stood by the foot of the cross, and watched Him die. She was present as the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and transformed them at Pentecost. And today, we celebrate that she, as a Christian, follows Jesus to paradise and receives the fullness of redemption. We hope and pray that we will follow

her in her assumption. In the Creed, we proclaim this belief in the promise of the Resurrection of the dead at the last day.

We need this model of Mary and her Assumption to encourage us on our journey. As we struggle with the still present horrible reality of human evil, we need to remain faithful and not lose hope. In the face of terrorism and economic struggles, we need to remember that humanity is worth saving. As we see natural and environmental catastrophes and wonder where God is in the midst of evil, we need to see the faithful, present, courageous model of Mary and live in the hope that we too will follow her Son in to the resurrection.

Does life seem challenging? Do the world's woes seem overwhelming? Does evil seem to be let loose and God not present as a stronger force? If we ever have those fears, cling to Mary. Experience her faith. See in the salvation of Jesus, that we are saved. We humans, like Mary, can be saved. She was born sinless, we are reborn sinless in baptism. Let the power of that saving grace keep us hopeful that God will prevail. We will be saved, and we shall enjoy the power of the Kingdom of God.