

1.

'And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.'

2.

Death comes to us all, but it isn't the end of us.

These are two expressions of the same belief. What's the difference between them? The first is rich, lyrical, metaphorical and it touches the heart – it is the first verse of a poem by Dylan Thomas. The second is a plain statement that touches nothing except some cobwebbed theological corner of our mind – if we have such a place. These two are examples of the symbolic and the concrete.

The poem is full of powerful images that make you say: Wow. The plain statement makes you say: Ok.

This poetic, heart-touching way is how we should approach the dogma of the Assumption – otherwise we're left with the plain statement uttered by Pius XII in 1950. He said:

“We proclaim and define it to be a dogma revealed by God that the immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever virgin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven.”

Pius XII didn't make this up as he went along. It had been believed for many centuries before 1950. The earliest reference to the Assumption was in the 5th century from Juvenal, the Bishop of Jerusalem and icons depicting it had been painted –it is called the Dormition in the Orthodox Churches – soon after that. In the West, great artists like Albrecht Dürer, Titian, El Greco, Velazquez and Rubens, all painted their own versions of the Assumption. Like Dylan Thomas' poem, the paintings are imaginative, symbolic expressions of the dogmatic truth declared by Pius XII – which had been believed by the faithful for one-and-a-half thousand years anyway. I think the symbolic understanding should perhaps always come before the literal and the concrete.

How did an unknown young Jewish girl come to be the Queen of Heaven? Actually, it was inevitable... because something deep in the human heart and soul needed her to. Literally and concretely it doesn't make any sense. Symbolically, poetically, imaginatively, it makes all the sense in the world. If we approach the dogma of the Assumption in this way, we begin to understand why.

The dogma of the Assumption sanctifies materiality, embodiedness, having an actual body – which traditionally the Church has never been keen on. Women in particular were

considered to carry 'bodiliness' in themselves. For many centuries they were seen as the tempters of men, the carriers of bodily desires, the representatives of bodily needs, the source and origin of sexual sin. The first thing that Adam says when God asks him what he has done, is to whine: 'The woman tempted me!' And they've been saying it ever since.

The dogma of the Assumption exalts the feminine. Only Mary, a woman, is given this unique honour: with her assumption into heaven, all women are honoured and glorified with her; the dignity and the beauty and the immeasurable richness of women is made manifest and acknowledged in this teaching. Women have always been the more faithful bearers of the flame of faith.

The Assumption is also a validation of the God-given worth and value of that being a creature implies: the aches and pains and ills that the body is heir to, the joys and delights that creaturehood brings. When we suffer the pain of arthritis or put our hearing aids or false teeth in, when our bowel movements are cantankerous or our eyesight not what it was, the Assumption poetically and symbolically teaches us that the body, the flesh and all that is involved in being created, will not be lost, but transformed and glorified in a way that we cannot possibly imagine. As Julian of Norwich said:

"Every mark of our shame will become a sign of our glory."