

On November 1<sup>st</sup> 1950, Pope Pius XII declared the dogma of the Assumption and exercised papal infallibility in doing so. This is the first and – so far – the only time that any pope, ever, has declared a doctrine infallibly. The doctrine of infallibility has always been much misunderstood; it simply says that on matters of faith or morals, when the pope exercises the papal infallibility, he is protected from error. It doesn't mean that he can infallibly declare it will rain on Tuesday or that the moon is made of cheddar – he can only speak infallibly on matters of faith and morals – and Pius XII is the only pope ever to have done so.

When Pius XII declared the dogma of the Assumption, he didn't just do so out of the blue, or on a whim – he didn't just wake up one morning and the notion popped into his head. The idea of Mary being taken up into heaven is a very early one; artists depicted it across the centuries, many years before Pius XII was even born. From the 6<sup>th</sup> century in the Greek and Russian Eastern Orthodox Church and from the 7<sup>th</sup> century in the Western Latin

Church, the feast of the Assumption has been celebrated. Therefore, when Pius XII declared this dogma infallibly in 1950, he wasn't proclaiming anything new; he was looking back across the centuries and saying to *all* the People of God, living and dead: 'You were not wrong to believe this. You have not believed it in vain.' He was not declaring, but *confirming* a belief that had already been held for many centuries. This is what infallibility means.



The Assumption by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1670)

The earliest written reference to the Assumption is in the 5<sup>th</sup> century:

“Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD, made known to the Emperor Marcian and the Empress Pulcheria, who wished to possess the body of the Mother of God, that Mary died in the presence of all the Apostles, but that her tomb, when opened upon the request of St. Thomas, was found empty; wherefrom the Apostles concluded that the body was taken up to heaven.”

A contemporary spiritual writer, also a scientist, Fr Albert Cylwicky, has compared what God did for Mary to what Shah Jahan did for his wife when he built the Taj Mahal in her memory:

“By raising her from the dead and taking her into heaven – body and soul – God demonstrated his undying love for Mary. Like Shah Jahan, God could not bear the death of his beloved. However, God could do what no Indian emperor could do – raise her from the dead and restore her to life even more beautiful than before. God didn’t have to build

a Taj Mahal to memorialize Mary. Her glorified body is itself a magnificent temple of the Holy Spirit.”

I think this is a lovely way of putting it.

In the Eastern Church it is called the Dormition – the ‘falling asleep’ – because in both East and West there is no mention of Mary actually dying. Pius XII simply said: ‘when the course of her earthly life had ended.’ He didn’t used the word ‘died’.



The Dormition of the Virgin, Greek Icon (1392)

The dogma of the Assumption is alive and active on many levels: it is dogma but, more significantly, it is also poetry, imagery, it is symbolism, it is the music of a spiritual song, it is myth in the truest sense of

the word – that is, something which is always and everywhere true. A myth isn't something that never happened: it is something that is *always* happening in the transcendent world of psyche and meaning.

The Assumption sanctifies what the Church has sometimes – shamefully – taught was an unholy trio: the world, the flesh and woman. The world is materiality, embodiedness, having an actual body; the body is what St Paul means when he uses the Greek word *soma*. When he uses *sarx*, he means an attitude, a condition, a perspective which is materialistic, worldly and obsessed with physical pleasure – they are not the same thing. Women were considered to encapsulate all this in their own being. For many centuries women were seen as the tempters of men, the carriers of bodily desires, the representatives of bodily needs, the source and origin of sexual sin. What's the first thing that Adam says when God asked him what he has done? He whines: 'The woman tempted me!' *Plûs ça change*. The dogma of the Assumption corrects centuries of distortion. Firstly, it is a woman – Mary – who 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 exalted in the dogma of the Assumption. Besides, acknowledged or not, women have always been the most faithful bearers of the flame of faith. Secondly, in both East and West it is declared that Mary was taken up into heaven in both soul *and* in body; therefore the Assumption is also a validation of the God-given worth and value of the body and all that this implies: incarnation, creaturehood, the aches and pains and ills that the body is heir to, the joys and delights that the body can offer. When we suffer the pain of arthritis or lumbago, or feel our bones ache in a cold wind, or put our hearing aids or false teeth in, when our blood thins and we shiver even in late summer, when our bowel movements are cantankerous or our eyesight not what it was, when we have toothache or migraine, it is so easy for us to imagine how much lovelier it would be without the encumbrance of a body – that we could

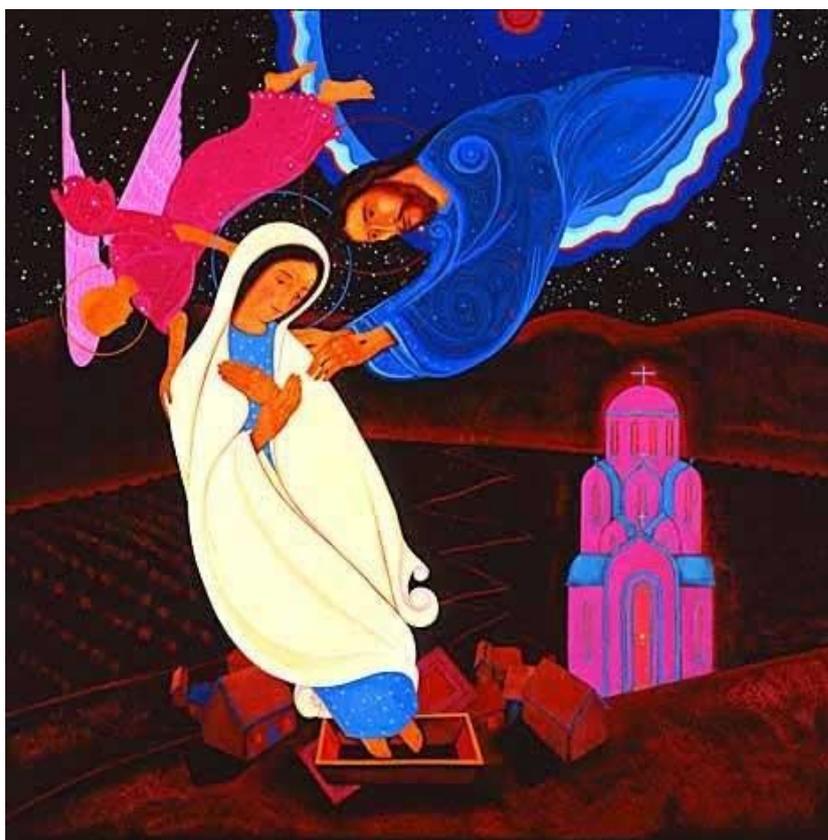
just float into the next life, like a wisp of cloud, smiling and liberated and light as a feather.

The dogma of the Assumption poetically and symbolically reveals to us that this is not going to happen. The body, the flesh, all that is involved in creatureliness will not be lost but transformed and glorified in a way that we cannot possibly imagine.

Ludwig van Beethoven was completely deaf by the time he composed his 9<sup>th</sup> symphony – the last great work of his late genius – and when he was conducting the first performance, he slowly became out of sync with the orchestra and choir, because he could hear neither. So they had another conductor high up in the galley and the performers followed this man's baton. Beethoven gradually became aware of this and turned to look back up at the 'real' conductor; everyone thought he would be very angry, but he simply smiled and said: "Gentlemen, in heaven I shall hear.'

He knew, instinctively, because his heart was capacious enough to grasp it, that nothing about our condition as a creature will ever be sloughed off

or abandoned – including his experience of deafness – but that *everything* about us, the best and the worst, will be saved, transfigured and turned into an eternal glory. This is what the Feast of the Assumption means; it is what its poetry, imagery, music and myth teaches us.



The Assumption by Michael O'Brien (20<sup>th</sup> century)

A last thought: when we say that Mary was taken up body and soul to heaven, we have to remember where Jesus told us the kingdom of heaven is: *within each one of us.*