

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 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 mature cheddar – he can speak infallibly *only* on matters of faith and morals – and Pius XII was the first and (so far) the last pope ever to have done so.

He didn't just do so out of the blue, or on a personal whim. The idea of Mary being taken up into heaven is a very early one; artists have depicted it across the centuries, long before Pius XII was ever 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. So the pope wasn't proclaiming anything new; he was looking

back through 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 a very long time. This is what infallibility means: to not proclaim a new belief, but to confirm an already existing one.

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.”

In the Eastern Church it is called the Feast of the Dormition – the ‘falling asleep’ of Mary – because in both East and West there is no mention of her actually dying. Pius XII simply said: ‘when the

course of her earthly life had ended.’ He didn’t use the word ‘died’.

Like every declared article of faith, the Assumption is a living mystery that takes on form and life within us: if it doesn’t, it’s a dead letter. If Christ is not born in our hearts and *never not* being born there, the outward celebration of the Nativity won’t do us much good – the medieval Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart pointed this out seven hundred years ago. If the Lord does not rise again to new life in our soul, the Resurrection benefits us little. Likewise, if the dogma of the Assumption is not a living mystery within us, what meaning does it have? It lives within us in many ways: as poetry for instance, as art, symbolism all of which are doorways, portals that open onto the reality of Mary’s presence in the human psyche. It is the music of a spiritual song; it is myth in the truest sense of the word – something which is always and everywhere true. A myth isn’t something that never happened: it is something that is *a/ways* happening.

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. The first thing that Adam says when God asks him what he has done, is to whine: ‘The woman tempted me!’ They’ve been saying it ever since.

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 this teaching. Acknowledged or not, women have always been the more 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 Assumption poetically and symbolically teaches 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. As Julian of Norwich said: “Every mark of our shame will become a sign of our glory.”

*Nothing* that is natural to the human condition will ever be sloughed off or abandoned: *everything* about us, the best and the worst, will be saved, transfigured and turned into an eternal glory. And one final thought: the teaching says that Mary was taken up body and soul to heaven; all we have to remember is where Jesus told us the kingdom of heaven is to be found: in here, the heart, within each one of us.