

There are two principal considerations concerning our celebration of the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary this Sunday, one of only two holy days of obligation (in addition to every Sunday) for Catholics in Australia, the other being Christmas Day. Those two considerations are:

- i) The fact of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and
- ii) Its significance for us.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 966) states: "The Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things." This was the formula of words used by Pope Pius XII when he infallibly defined this dogmatic teaching in 1950.

We might observe that this doctrinal definition of the Assumption does not use the words "death" or "died". Did Mary die? The Eastern churches refer to Mary's "dormition" - literally her "falling asleep". Given that Sacred Scripture ascribes the origin of natural death to sin, one could plausibly speculate that since Mary is without both original and actual sin, she would not die. Of course Jesus died, but not from natural causes. However, the Church traditionally accepts that Mary died before being assumed into the next life to be crowned Queen of Heaven*.

The Sacred Tradition of Holy Mother Church has long held this belief about the Assumption of the Mother of God, even if this belief was not explicitly defined by the teaching authority of the Church (her Magisterium) until the middle of last century. In his Apostolic Constitution on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pope Pius XII observes:

"In their sermons and speeches on the feast day of the Assumption of the Mother of God, the holy fathers and the great doctors of the church were speaking of something that the faithful already knew and accepted: all they did was to bring it out into the open, to explain its meaning and substance in other terms. Above all, they made it most clear that this feast commemorated not merely the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary did not experience bodily decay, but also her triumph over death and her heavenly glory, following the example of her only Son, Jesus Christ."

And here is the essential meaning for us, that in addition to Jesus Christ the Son of God, there is already a human person who has passed through death and enjoys the vision of God Himself and eternal life in the heavenly kingdom as a complete human person comprised of a unity of soul AND body. Mary has never known life as a disembodied soul. This underlies our Catholic belief that each human soul, i.e. everyone of us, is made to be united with a human body for all eternity. (We might say that a soul longs to be reunited with a body.) This belief should afford us great hope for eternal life and console us when we experience bodily suffering, disease, injury or decline in this life.

I want to conclude by harking back to the Second Reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Church at Colossae for last Sunday's Mass for the Solemnity of another Mary, Saint Mary of the

Cross MacKillop. Saint Paul could very well have had Mary the Mother of God in mind when he wrote these sublimely beautiful words to the Colossians: "You are God's chosen people, his saints; he loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, in gentleness and patience ... ". One obvious way in which we present ourselves to the world in everyday life is via our clothes, by what we are wearing. How does the world see us? How do we come across? Does it see in us, what it undoubtedly saw in the Church's greatest saint, i.e. Mary, the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church? Mary was habitually clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, in gentleness and patience. This is how she appeared and was to those who knew her. We would do very well to contemplate this description of Saint Paul of the Christian saint and even learn it by heart.

Please also try to spend some minutes each day during the week with any part of this Sunday's readings from Sacred Scripture which resonate with you. (The readings are in the "Saving Word" attachment which follows below.) I can also highly recommend what amounts to a second homily for the feast of the Assumption which is to be found in this week's parish bulletin attachment (which follows the Saving Word attachment).

*The stained glass window in Saint Peter's Church depicting the Coronation of Mary Queen of Heaven is presently lit up throughout the night, as it looks out over Surry Hills in the direction of Ward Park.

Thus St John Damascene, who is the greatest exponent of this tradition, compares the bodily Assumption of the revered Mother of God with her other gifts and privileges: It was right that she who had kept her virginity unimpaired through the process of giving birth should have kept her body without decay through death. It was right that she who had given her Creator, as a child, a place at her breast should be given a place in the dwelling-place of her God. It was right that the bride espoused by the Father should dwell in the heavenly bridal chamber. It was right that she who had gazed on her Son on the cross, her heart pierced at that moment by the sword of sorrow that she had escaped at his birth, should now gaze on him seated with his Father. It was right that the Mother of God should possess what belongs to her Son and be honoured by every creature as God's Mother and handmaid.

St Germanus of Constantinople considered the preservation from decay of the body of the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, and its elevation to heaven as being not only appropriate to her Motherhood but also to the peculiar sanctity of its virgin state: It is written, that you appear in beauty, and your virginal body is altogether holy, altogether chaste, altogether the dwelling-place of God; from which it follows that it is not in its nature to decay into dust, but that it is transformed, being human, into a glorious and incorruptible life, the same body, living and glorious, unharmed, sharing in perfect life.

Another very ancient author asserts: Being the most glorious Mother of Christ our saviour and our God, the giver of life and immortality, she is given life by him and shares bodily incorruptibility for all eternity with him who raised her from the grave and drew her up to him in a way that only he can understand.

All that the holy fathers say refers ultimately to Scripture as a foundation, which gives us the vivid image of the great Mother of God as being closely attached to her divine Son and always sharing his lot.

It is important to remember that from the second century onwards the holy fathers have been talking of the Virgin Mary as the new Eve for the new Adam: not equal to him, of course, but closely joined with him in the battle against the enemy, which ended in the triumph over sin and death that had been promised even in Paradise. The glorious resurrection of Christ is essential to this victory and its final prize, but the blessed Virgin's share in that fight must also have ended in the glorification of her body. For as the Apostle says: When this mortal nature has put on immortality, then the scripture will be fulfilled that says "Death is swallowed up in victory".

So then, the great Mother of God, so mysteriously united to Jesus Christ from all eternity by the same decree of predestination, immaculately conceived, an intact virgin throughout her divine motherhood, a noble associate of our Redeemer as he defeated sin and its consequences, received, as it were, the final crowning privilege of being preserved from the corruption of the grave and, following her Son in his victory over death, was brought, body and soul, to the highest glory of heaven, to shine as Queen at the right hand of that same Son, the immortal King of Ages.