

ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

The Lord of life has done great things for us.

Introduction



Mary is remembered for the last time in the New Testament at the beginning of the book of Acts: in prayer, surrounded by the apostles and the first Christian community (Acts 1:14). Then this sweet and reserved woman leaves the scene, silent and discreet as she entered. Then we don't know anything about her. Where she spent the last years of her life and how she left this earth were not mentioned in the canonical texts. Many versions of a single theme—the *Dormition* of the Virgin Mary—spread among Christians from the VI century onwards.

These apocryphal texts handed down a series of news about the last days of Mary and on her death. These are folk tales, largely fictional, whose original nucleus, however, dates back to the second century and composed in the ambient of the mother church of Jerusalem. It also contains some reliable information.

After Easter, Mary, in all probability, lived in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion, perhaps in the same house where her son had celebrated the Last Supper with his apostles. Her time to leave this world came—and here the

legendary aspect of the apocryphal stories begins—a heavenly messenger appeared and announced her coming exit. From the most remote lands, the apostles, miraculously transported on clouds, came to her bedside, conversed with her tenderly, staying next to her until the time when Jesus, with a host of angels, came to take her soul.

They accompanied her body in a procession to the brook of Kidron, and there laid her in a tomb cut into the rock. This is probably a historical detail. Since the first century, in fact, her tomb, near the grotto of Gethsemane, has been continuously venerated. In the fourth century, it was isolated from the others and enclosed in a church.

Three days after her burial—and here the legendary news resume—Jesus appears again to also take her body that the apostles had continued to watch. He gave orders to the angels to bring her on the clouds and the apostles to accompany her. The clouds made their way to the east, at the archway of paradise and, arrived in the kingdom of light. Among the songs of the angels and the most delicious scents, they took her down beside the tree of life.

These fictional details have evidently no historical value, however, they bear witness, through images and symbols, of the incipient devotion of the Christian people for the mother of the Lord.

The believers' reflection on the fate of Mary after death continued to grow over the centuries. It led to the belief in her assumption and, on 1 November 1950, to the papal definition: "The Immaculate Conception Mother of God ever Virgin, finished the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory."

What does this dogma mean? Is it perhaps that Mary's body did not suffer corruption or that only she and Jesus would be in heaven in flesh and blood, while the others would be dead in the heaven only with their souls, awaiting reunification with their bodies?

This naive and gross view of the ascension of Jesus and the Assumption of Mary—besides being a legacy of Greek dualistic philosophy and that contradicts the Bible that considers man an inseparable unit—is positively excluded by Paul. Writing to the Corinthians, he clarifies that it is not the material body that is resurrected, but "a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:44).

The text of the papal definition does not speak of "assumed into heaven"—as if there had been a shift in space or an "abduction" of her body from the grave to the dwelling of God—but it says: "assumed into heavenly glory."

The "heavenly glory" is not a place, but a new condition. Mary did not go to another place, bringing with her the fragile remains that are destined to return to dust. She has not abandoned the community of disciples who continue to walk as pilgrims in this world. She has changed the way to be with them, as her Son did on Easter day.

Mary—the "handmaid of the Lord"—is presented today to all believers not as a privileged one, but as the most excellent model, as the sign of destiny that awaits every person who believes "that the Lord's word would come true" (Lk 1:45).

The forces of life and death confront each other in a dramatic duel in the world. Pain, disease, infirmities of old age are the skirmishes that announce the final assault of the fearsome dragon. Eventually, the fight becomes

one-sided and death always grabs its prey. Does God, “lover of life,” impassively assist this defeat of the creatures in whose face his image is imprinted? The answer to this question is given to us today in Mary. In her, we are invited to contemplate the triumph of the God of life.

To internalize the message, we will repeat:

“O God, lover of life, you do not abandon anyone in the tomb.”

First Reading: Revelation 11:19; 12:1-6,10

The scene that opens up before the eyes of the seer of Revelation is great and today we are invited to contemplate it and to interpret it.

In the sky, that is, in God’s world, there are two signs. The first is described as “great”: “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” She is pregnant and cries out in pain, looking to her time of delivery.

The second sign is “a huge, red dragon,” a giant snake reddened with blood, with terrifying force—symbolized by the seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns. It sweeps along a third of the stars of heaven with its tail, throwing them down to the earth. The dragon stands in front of the woman who is about to give birth and tries to devour the child as soon as it is born. It is in a hurry because it knows that this child “is destined to govern all nations with an iron scepter.”

God intervenes; he takes the son to heaven, while the woman seeks refuge in the desert where she remains for three and a half years, nourished by the Lord.

Then a titanic battle breaks out. In heaven they face each other; Michael and his angels, on one hand, the dragon and his angels on the other. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, he who is called the devil, Satan, seducer of the whole world, together with his angels, is thrown out to the earth (vv. 7-9).

The scene of this fight is not reported by our reading that ends with the victory song, sung in heaven by a mysterious voice, at the end of the terrifying clash: “Now has salvation come, with the power and the kingdom of our God.”

After this overview, we can do a more detailed analysis of the passage.

This page was composed towards the end of the first century. It was a difficult time for the Christian communities tempted into apostasy because of the abuses, the harassment and persecution they were subjected to. The author addresses them in a deliberately scrambled way to avoid incurring the reprisals of those in power. He uses images and symbols that his readers—who know the Old Testament—can easily decode.

We first ask who is the son that is born. The fate that awaits him and that is related with the quotation of Psalm 2:9 leaves no doubt about his identity. Throughout the New Testament the one who is called “to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod” is always Christ. If he is the child about to be born, then the woman

can only be Mary. This is the simplest and immediate interpretation and, in fact, the Madonna is often depicted as bright as the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.

In fact, the Christian communities—who deciphered the symbolism of the text in the light of the Old Testament—did not think of Mary, but to the people of God that in the Bible is personified by the woman, fertile Bride of the Lord, the mother of the Messiah. Here the woman represents the Christian community; she embodies the faithful remnant of Israel. She is clothed with the sun, star that, for its splendor and its magnificence, was considered the symbol of all that is beautiful (Song 6:10) and of God himself (Ps 84:12).

The Christian community, loved by the Lord and filled with his most precious gifts, is beautiful because a divine light shines in her. The moon was, among the peoples of the ancient Middle East, the god who, for his stages of growth and decline, was in connection with the change of time.

In our text, this god-moon is crushed by the community of believers. This community is not subject to time constraints; it is not at the mercy of the vicissitudes of this transitory world because it is already in the Eternal world.

The crown on the head indicates the triumph. In God's perspective, the church has already obtained the final victory over evil. The twelve stars emphasize her identity: she is the true Israel who brings to fulfillment the promises made to Abraham.

The second sign, too, appeared in the sky, that is, in God's world. It's a huge red dragon that is opposed to the birth of the baby boy. It is the symbol of all forces hostile to God that are incarnated in centers of power.

They have three characteristics: they are perfect in designing evil (they have seven heads); they are monstrous in terms of strength, but not invincible (they have ten horns); they triumph, receive all honors and awards (they have seven crowns). These evil structures are opposed to the child since the day of his birth.

But it should be clear that the birth of Christ, which the seer of Revelation refers to, is not the delivery of Mary in Bethlehem, but Easter. This is the moment in which Christ, born from the grave, appeared to the world as the Messiah of God. Immediately, the powers of evil were hurled against him, but he is unattainable: the Father welcomed him in his glory.

The dragon's head is crushed—killed by the divine power of the Risen One (Michael is none other than God himself). It is finally defeated, but still struggles and with its tail sweeps a third of the stars of heaven to the earth. These are not the angels, but the Christians of Asia Minor who, shocked and disoriented, cannot resist the temptations of the evil one. They deny their faith and abandon their communities in large numbers.

The woman who escapes and seeks refuge in the desert is the people of God who has not succumbed to the lure and power of the dragon. The Lord puts her to the test, as it did with Israel. He places her in a position where she can show to God the authenticity of her love and does not abandon her. He assists her with his manna: the bread of the Word and the Eucharist.

Twelve hundred and sixty days correspond to three and a half years, the time that—according to the prophet Daniel (Dn 7:25)—is the length of a very painful but brief persecution.

At this point a conclusion is inevitable: if the child is Christ, and the woman is not Mary, but the

community of believers, then the son-Christ is born into the Church. That's right, and this is the moving message that the author wants to convey to discouraged Christians of his community. He invites them to become aware of their sublime identity. Day after day, with fatigue, pain, and in the midst of trials of all kinds, they are giving birth to the new man, Christ, in the history of the world.

Paul was aware of this maternal mission when he wrote to the Galatians: "My children, I still suffer the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19). The violence, the lies, the cruelties make them suffer, but they cannot scare the believer because they are not portents of death, but inevitable pangs of a difficult childbirth.

If the woman is not Mary, but the community, why does the liturgy propose this passage in the feast of the Assumption? All the texts, both of the Old and New Testaments, which speak of the people faithful to God, can be rightly referred to Mary because it is from her that the Messiah was born; she is the woman-Israel.

The invitation addressed to us today is to look at her, to how she accomplished her mission as mother. Reflecting in her the church, she discovers her own identity as generating the whole Christ, the One who will sum up in himself all creation.

The final passage, "Now has salvation come" is an invitation to hope. Despite the overwhelming power that the forces of evil still flaunt, the believer knows that the dragon has already been defeated by the "power of Christ"; its backlash will be even terrifying, but the head was crushed—as God had predicted from the beginning of the world (Gen 3:15).

Second reading: 1 Corinthians 15:20-26

The Corinthian Christians were firmly convinced that Christ was resurrected. However, some of them encountered serious difficulties to admit the resurrection of all the dead. That of Jesus—they thought—constituted a special and unique case; it was a kind of exception to the fate of death that unites all people.

In the last part of his letter, Paul addresses these doubtful people: "If there is no resurrection of the dead—he says—then Christ has not been raised" (1 Cor 15:13). His reasoning is simple: if Christ has not succeeded in completely defeating the most terrible of his opponents, then he is not the Lord of the universe, but its enemy, death. She is the dominatrix.

Our reading starts at this point with a solemn affirmation: Christ's resurrection is not unique, but it is the first fruit, which follows the abundant harvest, represented by all humanity.

Christ did not eliminate biological death: the human body, like that of every living being, wears away and ends up being consumed. He won over death depriving it of its lethal sting (1 Cor 15:55), transforming it into a birth. This is the victory that we sing at the Easter Vigil.

Today, we celebrate the liberation from the dead wrought by God in Mary. Let's celebrate because in her we contemplate the dawn of the new humanity, because what God has done in her is the fate that awaits us all.

Gospel: Luke 1:39-56

Before the evidence of the death and corruption of a body in the tomb, it takes a lot of courage to believe that the Lord is the God of life and to hope for a life beyond life. In today's feast, we are offered as a model the one who has always trusted in God.

Elizabeth proclaims her blessed because "she believed that the Lord's word would come true!" (v. 45). Mary responds to her by raising a hymn of praise to the Lord.

Every evening the Christian community sings it at the conclusion of vespers. It is to keep alive in the faithful, perhaps disturbed by the vicissitudes of the day, the gaze of faith in which Mary has been able to read the events of her life and the history of her people.

It begins with a cry of joy: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord" (v. 47). Literally, the phrase reads: "I render the Lord great." Our heart tends to imagine him small, modeling him tailored to our meanness and pettiness: a generous God with the good and angry, implacable avenger with those who transgress his orders, just as we are.

Mary has a pure look; she has experienced the immensity of God's love. She understood that he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, for this, she feels the irrepressible need to proclaim his greatness.

Anyone who assimilates the gaze of Mary and discovers that the Lord loves people without conditions exults—like her—in God his savior. He is pleased because salvation does not depend on his abilities and good works, but it is anchored in the unfailing faithfulness of God. This certainty puts an end to the anxieties, which are awakened by the desire to build one's own perfection and is the source of inner serenity, of peace, of unbounded joy.

After having magnified the Lord, Mary clarifies the motive for which she raises a hymn of praise to him: "He has looked upon his servant in her lowliness" (v. 48). God's gaze is not attracted by the moral virtues and the qualities of a person, but by his poverty, his needs to be enriched by the gifts of heaven. Mary knows she is a stupendous woman, but she has no reason to boast. She is conscious of not having any merit and recognizes that everything in her is a free gift of the Lord.

She said to the angel of the annunciation: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord;" in her song of praise the self-presentation returns: I am the servant. It is the title of honor that the Bible reserves to those who have placed their lives at God's disposal.

"People forever will call me blessed" because, looking at her, those who are despised for their distressing condition, physical or moral, will cease to feel defeated and rejected by God. They will realize to be in the unique position to become the recipients of the Lord's tenderness.

The Mighty One has done great things for me (v. 49). 'Great things' is the expression with which the Bible presents the extraordinary interventions of God: "For wonders are past all reckoning, his miracles beyond all counting" (Job 5:9). He is not the Almighty who can do what he wants. He is the powerful that, respectful of the laws of creation and of human freedom, always manages to make unexpected and surprising prodigies of love.

The second part of the passage begins (vv. 50-55) where Mary reviews the Lord's wonderful works of love. She explains first why he is so attentive and caring. He generously distributes his benefits because he is merciful: From age to age his mercy extends to those who live in his presence (v. 50).

Merciful for us is the one who is moved in the face of misfortune, the pain, the condition of the poor and those affected by disasters. Yet, this feeling would be in vain if we do not move to intervene on behalf of those in need of help.

In the Bible, God presents himself as “merciful and gracious” (Ex 34:6) and the Hebrew words that are used, not only express an intense and deep emotion—that which the mother feels for the child she is carrying—but also the action that this feeling causes, the irresistible impulse to rescue the loved one. Throughout the ages, those who fear the Lord—that is, those who trusted him and his word—have always experienced his tenderness and his care.

The song goes on to list seven of God’s saving interventions.

He has acted with power and done wonders (v. 51).

The Bible often mentions the arm of God, symbol of the strength with which he intervenes to free the oppressed, protect the weak, defend those who suffer injustice.

Mary knows the history of her people and recalls that the Lord went to Egypt to choose Israel “by the strength of trials and signs, by wonders and by wars, with a firm hand and an outstretched arm” (Dt 4:34). She is not even touched by the doubt that evil will prevail over good, the lie over the truth, prevarication over righteousness, arrogance over meekness. She knows that the arm of the Lord keeps a firm grip on the destinies of the world and the life of every person.

He has scattered the proud (v. 51).

With this term the Bible indicates the insolent, those who are not interested in God; they speak with pride and look down on everyone. The Lord—promises Mary—scatters them. It is not an invitation to wait patiently for God to intervene to break down and reduce to an object of ridicule those who prevail. The Lord does not triumph by humiliating those who mock him, but turns his fatherly word and converts them with his love. It is the new world that Mary announces, the world from which the haughty and overbearing are dispersed—are made to disappear. All are turned into humble servants of their brothers.

He has put down the mighty from their thrones and lifted those who are downtrodden (v. 52).

History teaches that the strong have always dominated, and the weak were subjugated. Mary knows it. She belongs to a people tyrannized by the great empires. Now—she assures—God is on the side of the poor and has put into action a revolution; he overturned the balance of power: the powerful are overthrown and the miserable lifted.

Has the moment of revenge arrived? With God’s help, will the weak lift their head, conquer the powerful and subject those who have oppressed them? If that were the result of the divine intervention, we would not see a new event, but only the replacement of a class of exploiters by another. God does not enter history to play the part of the hero in that insane script that, always, people have staged. He does not intervene with force to change the actors, but to introduce a completely different script: the play in which we rage to climb up and rule the roost. Now he competes to go down at the bottom, and to become servants for love, to be bread for the hungry. Great and worthy of honor is no longer the one seated on a throne, but one who stays below and responds with joy to the demands of those who need him.

This is the real novelty: a new heart given to all, a heart like that of Christ, a heart of servants. Will we ever see this kind of humanity? Mary is so certain that God will build her that speaks to the past—"has overturned, has raised"—as if this prodigious transformation of the world was already made. She recalls she kept well in mind the words of the heavenly messenger: "With God nothing is impossible" (Lk 1:37).

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty (v. 53).

"The earth and its fullness belong to the Lord, the world and all that dwells in it" (Ps 24:1). If everything belongs to God, humans are not masters of anything; they are guests, diners at the table that the generous father has laid for his children. He bestows his gifts to everyone so that they equally participate; he who gathers them for himself, who refuses to share them takes possession of goods not his, commits robbery.

Greed—the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10)—leads to grabbing more than necessary and to enrich oneself. Injustice, inequality, discrimination, and a world at odds with the will of God are the results of unquenchable greed. Mary sees a new world rising, a world in which diners share what the Father puts at their disposal; a world where everyone is satiated with bread, freedom, and love.

She has a message of hope for the rich: God sends them away empty. It is not a threat of punishment; it is a proclamation of salvation. The assets they have accumulated—often by extortion and robbery—have been for them a source of pleasure, but also of cares and anxieties; they have become a bulky weight, a burden that has weighed down their hearts, making them insensitive to the needs of the brothers.

God sends them away empty; he lightens them of the burden of riches, warning that "we have brought nothing into the world, and we will leave it with nothing" (1 Tim 6:7), making them understand that "even though you have many possessions, it is not that which gives you life" (Lk 12:15) and convincing them that "happiness lies more in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:35).

The song closes with a reflection on God's faithfulness to the promises made to the patriarchs and to David (vv. 54-55).

Israel is a people who remembers. The Lord often invites her not to forget the wonders he has accomplished and the promises made to the fathers of old (Dt 4:9; 7:18). Mary—daughter of this people—also remembers and is certain that God does not forget the oath he swore to Abraham and his descendants. The child she is carrying in her womb is the faithful response of God to the commitments he has undertaken with his people.

Not just now, but forever, for eternity—ensures Mary—God will remain faithful. He will never fail in his covenant of love with people and, certainly, will not abandon them even in death.

—

Fr. Fernando Armellini