



Office of the Bishop

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The Assumption of the Virgin: Doctrine, Conscience and Behavior

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The Catholic Church, like the Orthodox and ancient churches of the east, firmly believes that, at the end of her earthly pilgrimage, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Savior, was assumed body and soul into heaven to live eternity in the glory of the Holy Trinity. This mystery is an elemental part of the traditional heritage of the apostolic faith. It was propagated from the Christian antiquity, and celebrated festively in the public worship of God's people on August 15. It was finally proclaimed as an article of Catholic faith by Pope Pius XII in 1950. Theologians say that the pope solemnly defined the doctrine not to repress a doubt among the Christian community, but to emphasize once more a major aspect of the Christian faith.

The Pope wanted to emphasize that human beings, in the totality of our existence as individuals endowed with body and soul, are loved by God and, in consequence of that love, destined to participate fully in the eternal happiness of God. Mary was the first among the redeemed called to enjoy the ultimate victory over death, a victory which her Son had obtained on the Cross and had expressed the reality of the resurrection. Christ rose in His own body, Mary was assumed by the grace of her Son in her own body, and we are destined by that same grace to rise again body and soul at the Last Judgment. The complete plan of God includes the resurrection of our bodies. The Scriptures teach us this when, for example, St. Paul says that Christ "will change our lowly bodies to be like His own glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). And we profess this truth in the Creed each Sunday: "I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen."

The Second World War, which ended in 1945, revealed countless atrocities against human dignity. Five years later, the Pope deemed it necessary to emphasize the dignity of the human body and its destiny as a participant in eternal glory. The Pope wept bitterly for the loss of respect for the totality, body and soul, of the human being. As we all know, during the war, men without conscience had committed horrific experiments on prisoners, justifying such behavior as necessary to advance biotechnical research. Without any hint of human compassion, those who carried out the vivisection of prisoners, as though they were animals, conducted these acts on men, women, children and adolescents. Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, Poles, and many others considered by the agents of such cruelties as void of any human value, were subjected to appalling treatment

and torture. Only consciences which had put aside the dignity of man, or which saw man only as a physical animal, without a noble destiny or an elevated dignity, could tolerate such iniquities perpetrated against human beings.

Perhaps the Pope foresaw that during the modern era initiated by the Second World War, our time, there would arise an even more calamitous crisis attacking the dignity of human beings. In fact, we are living in such times. The doctrine of the Assumption serves to inform our conscience and guide our behavior. As Catholic Christians sent to evangelize the culture, we must strengthen our conscience with the truth about the dignity of human beings. Thus equipped, we must enter the debate on the social issues of our times and struggle, for example, against efforts to legitimize experimentation on human embryos, or abortion, or euthanasia of the sick. These are things that some consider as “social progress,” but in reality they are assaults on human dignity. God the Creator and Redeemer of the world has endowed all people, without exception, with extraordinary dignity.

Without the truth revealed by Jesus Christ, we are not able to understand our own dignity. This truth is fully preserved in the Catholic faith and shown forth most clearly in Mary of the Assumption. Contemplating the beauty of the grace given to Mary, she leads us to a deep appreciation of *who we are*, or better still, *who we are under God's eyes*. Creatures of flesh and blood, yet we are not merely irrational beings without divine dignity. The human creature is such a mystery! We are at the same time vulnerable, deserving of help and compassion to survive, and possessing all things because of our capacity to know and love the God who has redeemed us from suffering and death. Mary of the Assumption, participating fully body and soul in the redemption, shows forth our true identity under God's gaze.

O Mary, Mother of the Savior, be our light in the midst of current darkness that seeks to subject human dignity to the whims of the powerful! Be the defender of the weak, the marginalized, the frail in mind and body. Stir us to fight for the protection of all as human dignity deserves, given that we are all so loved by your Son, and destined, body and soul, for the glory of God. Amen.