

Mary, assumed body and soul into heavenly glory

Last month we started looking at the Marian dogmas – the doctrines about Mary infallibly taught as the Church’s faith. We spoke of the first three of those four dogmas: Mary being Mother of God; her perpetual virginity; and her Immaculate Conception. Those dogmas also illustrate the three ways the Church teaches something infallibly. That Mary is the Mother of God was defined as dogma by an Ecumenical Council, the Council of Ephesus in 431. Her perpetual virginity has been taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, the pope and the bishops in communion with him scattered round the world, united in their ordinary teaching in handing this on as something definitive. And finally, the Immaculate Conception was defined ex cathedra by the pope alone, Bl. Pius IX in 1854.

Sometimes people wrongly imagine the only way of infallible teaching is that last way, an *ex cathedra* proclamation of the pope, leaving out the numerous definitions made by Ecumenical Councils, as well as the teachings of the ordinary and universal Magisterium. (I once met someone with the extraordinary idea that the only infallible teachings in the whole Catholic Faith were the *ex cathedra* papal proclamations of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption! So not even the resurrection or divinity of Christ, apparently.) So remember those three ways of infallible teaching: the pope defining *ex cathedra*; a definition by an Ecumenical Council; and the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

We come lastly to the fourth Marian dogma, the Assumption, which was infallibly defined *ex cathedra* by Venerable Pius XII on 1 November 1950, in the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* (DS 3903). The Pope proclaimed:

‘To the glory of Almighty God, who has lavished this special affection upon the Virgin Mary, for the honour of her Son, the immortal King of the Ages and the Victor over sin and death, for the increase of the glory of that same august Mother, and for the joy and exultation of the entire Church; by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by Our own authority,

‘We pronounce, declare and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.

‘Hence if anyone, which God forbid, should dare wilfully to deny or to call into doubt that which We have defined, let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic Faith... It is forbidden to any man to change this, Our declaration, pronouncement, and definition or, by rash attempt, to oppose and counter it. If any man should presume to make such an attempt, let him know that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul.’

The Assumption had been the traditional belief in the Church from ancient times – the Church can’t add totally new dogmas to divine revelation, but can only make explicit what was somehow contained from the first in what God had revealed by the time of the death of the last Apostle, when ‘public revelation’ closed. But the proclamation of Pius XII made this belief in Mary’s Assumption an undeniable obligation of faith. This process whereby a teaching is made more explicit, after deeper reflection by the Church, is what we call ‘development of doctrine’, which St John Henry Newman explained in great depth.

The more common teaching in the Church from ancient times was that before sharing in her Son's bodily Resurrection in the Assumption, Mary, in conformity with him, also shared his Death. This is called her 'Dormition' – 'falling asleep'. From the 17th century, some theologians proposed that Mary was taken into heaven *without* having first died. And when Pius XII defined the Assumption, he refrained from infallibly excluding that newer opinion as being contrary to the Faith – using the non-committal form of words, 'having completed the course of her earthly life'.

However, these two alternatives weren't placed thereby on an equal footing. As St John Paul II explained, Pius didn't intend to *deny* the fact of Mary's death, and John Paul went on in that same teaching to *affirm* the traditional belief in her death. (General Audience, 25 June 1997) So from his confirmation of the tradition, the understanding that Mary died before being assumed into heaven, though (unlike the Assumption itself) still not an infallible dogma, should nonetheless be seen as part of the ordinary authoritative teaching of the Magisterium, to which we adhere with a religious assent.

A fascinating testimony of Pius XII was of a personal repeat of part of Fatima's 'Miracle of the Sun', in the Vatican gardens at the time of his proclamation of the dogma. This happened, he attested, at 4:00 pm on 30 October 1950, 31 October, 1 November (All Saints, the day of the dogmatic definition) and 8 November (in those times, the liturgical octave of All Saints).

By his handwritten account (on display at the Vatican in 2008), just as with the crowds at Fatima on 13 October 1917 he could stare at the sun without discomfort. In his words: 'The opaque globe began moving outwards, slowly turning over upon itself, and going from left to right and vice-versa. But within the globe very strong movements could be seen in all clarity and without interruption...Several times, on other days at the same hour and in identical or very similar atmospheric conditions, I tried to look at the sun to see if the same phenomenon would appear to me, but in vain; I could not stare at the sun for an instant.'

His legate Cardinal Tedeschini revealed the event to the crowds at Fatima at the close of the extended Holy Year on 13 October 1951. [J. De Marchi *Fatima: The Facts* (1954) p. 228] So we can see in this experience of Pius XII a sign of God's 'endorsement', both of the truth of the Assumption itself and of papal claims to infallible divine guidance in such teachings. (And by extraordinary 'coincidence' beyond human planning, on the very day the Queen assumed into heaven first came down to Fatima, 13 May 1917, Eugenio Pacelli, who as Pius XII would define her Assumption, was being ordained Bishop – endowing him with the essential sacramental component of the papal authority by which he would declare the dogma 33 years later.)

Obviously, our faith isn't based on proofs or private revelations, but on the Word of God; and the mere fact of the Church having defined it, is sufficient to ground our absolute certainty. But just as with St Bernadette, a few years after the definition of the Immaculate Conception, reporting to the parish priest that the Lady at the grotto had said, 'I *am* the Immaculate Conception'; so also with this miracle to which Pius XII testified: they're extra gifts God gratuitously gives his faithful People, to strengthen and help us in our weakness.

So we rejoice in this dogma of the Assumption, that our beloved Mother is already in heaven not only in soul but also in body, the image and exemplar of the future resurrection of all the saints, and the destiny towards which her loving prayers are safely and surely guiding us.