

## The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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You may recollect, my brethren, Our Lord's words when on the day of his resurrection he had joined the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, and found them sad and perplexed in consequence of his death. He said, "Ought not Christ to suffer these things, and so enter into his glory?" He appealed to the fitness and congruity which existed between this otherwise surprising event and the other truths which had been revealed concerning the divine purpose of saving the world. And so, too, St Paul, in speaking of the same wonderful appointment of God; "It became him," he says, "for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, who had brought many sons unto glory, to consummate the author of their salvation by suffering." Elsewhere, speaking of prophesying, or the exposition of what is latent in divine truth, he bids his brethren exercise the gift, "according to the analogy or rule of faith"; that is, so that the doctrine preached may correspond and fit into what is already received.

Thus, you see, it is a great evidence of truth, in the case of revealed teaching, that it is so consistent, that it so hangs together, that one thing springs out of another, that each part requires and is required by the rest.

This great principle, which is exemplified so variously in the structure and history of Catholic doctrine, which will receive more and more illustrations the more carefully and minutely we examine the subject, is brought before us especially at this season, when we are celebrating the Assumption of our Blessed Lady, the Mother of God, into heaven. We receive it on the belief of ages; but, viewed in the light of reason, it is the fitness of this termination of her earthly course which so persuasively recommends it to our minds: we feel it “ought” to be; that it “becomes” her Lord and Son thus to provide for one who was so singular and special, both in herself and her relations to him. We find that it is simply in harmony with the substance and main outlines of the doctrine of the Incarnation, and that without it Catholic teaching would have a character of incompleteness, and would disappoint our pious expectations.

Let us direct our thoughts to this subject today, my brethren; and with a view of helping you to do so, I will first state what the Church has taught and defined from the first ages concerning the Blessed Virgin, and then you will see how naturally the devotion which her children show her, and the praises with which they honour her, follow from it.

Now, as you know, it has been held from the first, and defined from an early age, that Mary is the Mother

of God. She is not merely the Mother of Our Lord's manhood, or of Our Lord's body, but she is to be considered the mother of the Word himself, the Word incarnate. God, in the person of the Word, the Second Person of the All-glorious Trinity, humbled himself to become her Son. *Non horruisti Virginis uterum*, as the Church sings, "Thou didst not disdain the Virgin's womb." He took the substance of his human flesh from her, and clothed in it he lay within her; and he bore it about with him after birth, as a sort of badge and witness that he, though God, was hers. He was nursed and tended by her; he was suckled by her; he lay in her arms. As time went on, he ministered to her, and obeyed her. He lived with her for thirty years, in one house, with an uninterrupted intercourse, and with only the saintly Joseph to share it with him. She was the witness of his growth, of his joys, of his sorrows, of his prayers; she was blest with his smile, with the touch of his hand, with the whisper of his affection, with the expression of his thoughts and his feelings, for that length of time. Now, my brethren, what ought she to be, what is it becoming that she should be, who was so favoured?

Such a question was once asked by a heathen king, when he would place one of his subjects in a dignity becoming the relation in which the latter stood towards him. That subject had saved the king's life, and what was to be done to him in return? The king asked, "What should be done to the man whom the king desireth to honour?" And he received the following answer: "The man whom the king wisheth to honour ought to be

clad in the king's apparel, and to be mounted on the king's saddle, and to receive the royal diadem on his head; and let the first among the king's princes and presidents hold his horse, and let him walk through the streets of the city, and say, "Thus shall he be honoured, whom the king hath a mind to honour." So stands the case with Mary; she gave birth to the Creator, and what recompense shall be made her? What shall be done to her, who had this relationship to the Most High? What shall be the fit accompaniment of one whom the Almighty has deigned to make, not his servant, not his friend, not his intimate, but his superior, the source of his second being, the nurse of his helpless infancy, the teacher of his opening years? I answer, as the king was answered: Nothing is too high for her to whom God owes his human life; no exuberance of grace, no excess of glory, but is becoming, but is to be expected there, where God has lodged himself, whence God has issued. Let her "be clad in the king's apparel," that is, let the fullness of the Godhead so flow into her that she may be a figure of the incommunicable sanctity, and beauty, and glory, of God himself: that she may be the Mirror of Justice, the Mystical Rose, the Tower of Ivory, the House of Gold, the Morning Star. Let her "receive the king's diadem upon her head," as the Queen of heaven, the Mother of all living, the Health of the Weak, the Refuge of Sinners, the Comforter of the Afflicted. And "let the first amongst the king's princes walk before her," let angels and prophets, and apostles, and martyrs, and all saints, kiss the hem of her garment and rejoice under the shadow of her throne.

Thus is it that King Solomon has risen up to meet his mother, and bowed himself unto her, and caused a seat to be set for the king's mother, and she sits on his right hand.

We should be prepared, then, my brethren, to believe that the Mother of God is full of grace and glory, from the very fitness of such a dispensation, even though we had not been taught it; and this fitness will appear still more clear and certain when we contemplate the subject more steadily. Consider, then, that it has been the ordinary rule of God's dealings with us, that personal sanctity should be the attendant upon high spiritual dignity of place or work. The angels, who, as the word imports, are God's messengers, are also perfect in holiness; "without sanctity, no one shall see God": no defiled thing can enter the courts of heaven; and the higher its inhabitants are advanced in their ministry: about the throne, the holier are they, and the more absorbed in their contemplation of that Holiness upon which they wait. The Seraphim, who immediately surround the Divine Glory, cry day and night, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts"! So is it also on earth; the prophets have ordinarily not only gifts but graces; they are not only inspired to know and to teach God's will, but inwardly converted to obey it. For surely those only can preach the truth duly who feel it personally; those only transmit it fully from God to man, who have in the transmission made it their own.

I do not say that there are no exceptions to this rule, but they admit of an easy explanation; I do not say that

it never pleases Almighty God to convey an intimation of his will through bad men; of course, for all things can be made to serve him. By all, even the wicked, he accomplishes his purposes, and by the wicked he is glorified. Our Lord's death was brought about by his enemies, who did his will, while they thought they were gratifying their own. Caiaphas, who contrived and effected it, was made use of to predict it. Balaam prophesied good of God's people in an earlier age, by a divine compulsion, when he wished to prophesy evil. This is true; but in such cases Divine Mercy is plainly overruling the evil, and manifesting his power, without recognising or sanctioning the instrument. And again, it is true, as he tells us himself, that in the last day "Many shall say, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name cast out devils, and done many miracles?" And that he shall answer, "I never knew you." This, I say, is undeniable; it is undeniable first, that those who have prophesied in God's name may afterwards fall from God, and lose their souls. Let a man be ever so holy now, he may fall away; and, as present grace is no pledge of perseverance, much less are present gifts; but how does this show that gifts and graces do not commonly go together? Again, it is undeniable that those who have had miraculous gifts may nevertheless have never been in God's favour, not even when they exercised them; as I will explain presently. But I am now speaking, not of having gifts, but of being prophets. To be a prophet is something much more personal than to possess gifts. It is a sacred office, it implies a mission, and is the high distinction,

not of the enemies of God, but of his friends. Such is the Scripture rule. Who was the first prophet and preacher of justice? Enoch, who walked "by faith," and "pleased God," and was taken from a rebellious world. Who was the second? "Noah," who "condemned the world, and was made heir of the justice which is through faith." Who was the next great prophet? Moses, the lawgiver of the chosen people, who was the "meekest of all men who dwell on the earth." Samuel comes next, who served the Lord from his infancy in the Temple; and then David, who, if he fell into sin, repented, and was "a man after God's heart." And in like manner Job, Elias, Isaias, Jeremias, Daniel, and above them all St John the Baptist, and then again St Peter, St Paul, St John, and the rest, are all especial instances of heroic virtue, and patterns to their brethren. Judas is the exception, but this was by a particular dispensation to enhance Our Lord's humiliation and suffering.

Nature itself witnesses to this connection between sanctity and truth. It anticipates that the fountain from which pure doctrine comes should itself be pure; that the seat of divine teaching, and the oracle of faith should be the abode of angels; that the consecrated home, in which the word of God is elaborated, and whence it issues forth for the salvation of the many, should be holy, as that word itself is holy. Here you see the difference of the office of a prophet and a mere gift, such as that of miracles. Miracles are the simple and direct work of God; the worker of them is but an instrument or organ. And in consequence he need not be holy, because he has not, strictly speaking, a share

in the work. So again the power of administering the sacraments, which also is supernatural and miraculous, does not imply personal holiness; nor is there anything surprising in God's giving to a bad man this gift, or the gift of miracles, any more than in his giving him any natural talent or gift, strength or agility of frame, eloquence, or medical skill. It is otherwise with the office of preaching and prophesying, and to this I have been referring; for the truth first goes into the minds of the speakers, and is apprehended and fashioned there, and then comes out from them as, in one sense, its source and its parent. The Divine Word is begotten in them, and the offspring has their features and tells of them. They are not like "the dumb animal, speaking with man's voice," on which Balaam rode, a mere instrument of God's word, but they have "received an unction from the Holy One, and they know all things" and "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty": and while they deliver what they have received, they enforce what they feel and know. "We have known and believed," says St John, "the charity which God hath to us."

So has it been all through the history of the Church: Moses does not write as David; nor Isaias as Jeremias: nor St John as St Paul. And so of the great doctors of the Church, St Athanasius, St Augustine, St Ambrose, St Leo, St Thomas, each has his own manner, each speaks his own words, though he speaks the while the words of God. They speak from themselves, they speak in their own persons, they speak from the heart, from their own experience, with their own arguments,



with their own deductions, with their own modes of expression. Now can you fancy, my brethren, such hearts, such feelings to be unholy? How could it be so, without defiling, and thereby nullifying, the word of God? If one drop of corruption makes the purest water worthless, as the slightest savour of bitterness spoils the most delicate viands, how can it be that the word of truth and holiness can proceed profitably from impure lips and an earthly heart? No; as is the tree, so is the fruit. "Beware of false prophets," says Our Lord, and then he adds, "From their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" Is it not so, my brethren? Which of you would go to ask counsel of another, however learned, however gifted, however aged, if you thought him unholy? Nay, though you feel and are sure, as far as absolution goes, that a bad priest could give it as really as a holy priest, yet for advice, for comfort, for instruction, you would not go to one whom you did not respect. "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh"; "a good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth good, and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil."

So, then, is it in the case of the soul; but, as regards the Blessed Mary, a further thought suggests itself. She has no chance place in the divine dispensation; the Word of God did not merely come to her and go from her; he did not pass through her, as he visits us in Holy Communion. It was no heavenly body which the Eternal Son assumed, fashioned by the angels, and brought down to this lower world: no; he imbibed,

he absorbed into his divine Person her blood and the substance of her flesh, by becoming man of her. He received her lineaments and features, as the appropriate character in which he was to manifest himself to mankind. The child is like the parent, and we may well suppose that by his likeness to her was manifested her relationship to him. Her sanctity comes, not only of her being his mother, but also of his being her son. "If the first fruit be holy," says St Paul, "the mass also is holy; if the mass be holy, so are the branches." And hence the titles which we are accustomed to give her. He is the Wisdom of God, she therefore is the Seat of Wisdom; his presence is heaven, she therefore is the Gate of Heaven; he is infinite mercy, she then is the Mother of Mercy. She is the mother of "fair love and fear, and knowledge and holy hope"; is it wonderful, then, that she has left behind her in the Church below "an odour like cinnamon and balm, and sweetness like to choice myrrh"?

Such, then, is the truth ever cherished in the deep heart of the Church, and witnessed by the keen apprehension of her children, that no limits but those proper to a creature can be assigned to the sanctity of Mary. Therefore, did Abraham believe that a son should be born to him of his aged wife? Then Mary's faith must be held as greater when she accepted Gabriel's message. Did Judith consecrate her widowhood to God to the surprise of her people? Much more did Mary, from her first youth, devote her virginity. Did Samuel, when a child, inhabit the Temple, secluded from the world? Mary too was by her parents lodged

in the same holy precincts, even at the age when children first can choose between good and evil. Was Solomon on his birth called "dear to the Lord"? And shall not the destined Mother of God be dear to him from the moment she was born? But further still; St John the Baptist was sanctified by the Spirit before his birth; shall Mary be only equal to him? Is it not fitting that her privilege should surpass his? Is it wonderful, if grace, which anticipated his birth by three months, should in her case run up to the very first moment of her being, outstrip the imputation of sin, and be beforehand with the usurpation of Satan? Mary must surpass all the saints; the very fact that certain privileges are known to have been theirs persuades us, almost from the necessity of the case, that she had the same and higher. Her conception was immaculate, in order that she might surpass all saints in the date as well as the fullness of her sanctification.

But in a festive season, my dear brethren, I must not weary you with argument, when we should offer specially to the Blessed Virgin the homage of our love and loyalty; yet, let me finish as I have begun: I will be brief, but bear with me if I view her bright Assumption, as I have viewed her immaculate purity, rather as a point of doctrine than as a theme for devotion.

It was surely fitting, then, it was becoming, that she should be taken up into heaven and not lie in the grave till Christ's second coming, who had passed a life of sanctity and of miracle such as hers. All the works of God are in a beautiful harmony; they are carried on to the end as they begin. This is the difficulty which

men of the world find in believing miracles at all; they think these break the order and consistency of God's visible word, not knowing that they do but subserve a higher order of things, and introduce a supernatural perfection. But at least, my brethren, when one miracle is wrought, it may be expected to draw others after it for the completion of what is begun. Miracles must be wrought for some great end; and if the course of things fell back again into a natural order before its termination, how could we but feel a disappointment? And if we were told that this certainly was to be, how could we but judge the information improbable and difficult to believe?

Now this applies to the history of Our Lady. I say, it would be a greater miracle if, her life being what it was, her death was like that of other men, than if it were such as to correspond to her life. Who can conceive, my brethren, that God should so repay the debt, which he condescended to owe to his Mother, for the elements of his human body, as to allow the flesh and blood from which it was taken to moulder in the grave? Do the sons of men thus deal with their mothers? Do they not nourish and sustain them in their feebleness, and keep them in life while they are able? Or who can conceive that that virginal frame, which never sinned, was to undergo the death of a sinner? Why should she share the curse of Adam, who had no share in his fall? "Dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return," was the sentence upon sin; she, then, who was not a sinner, fitly never saw corruption. She died, then, as we hold because even Our Lord and Saviour

died; she died, as she suffered, because she was in this world, because she was in a state of things in which suffering and death are the rule. She lived under their external sway; and as he obeyed Caesar by coming for enrolment to Bethlehem, so did she, when God willed it, yield to the tyranny of death, and was dissolved into soul and body, as well as others. But though she died as well as others, she died not as others die; for, through the merits of her Son, by whom she was what she was, by the grace of Christ which in her had anticipated sin, which had filled her with light, which had purified her flesh from all defilement, she was also saved from disease and malady, and all that weakens and decays the bodily frame. Original sin had not been found in her, by the wear of her senses, and the waste of her frame and the decrepitude of years, propagating death. She died, but her death was a mere fact, not an effect; and, when it was over, it ceased to be. She died that she might live, she died as a matter of form or (as I may call it) an observance, in order to fulfil what is called the debt of nature – not primarily for herself or because of sin, but to submit herself to her condition, to glorify God, to do what her Son did; not, however, as her Son and Saviour, with any suffering for any special end; not with a martyr's death, for her martyrdom had been in living; not as an atonement, for man could not make it, and One had made it, and made it for all; but in order to finish her course, and to receive her crown.

And therefore she died in private. It became him, who died for the world, to die in the world's sight; it became the Great Sacrifice to be lifted up on high,

as a light that could not be hid. But she, the lily of Eden, who had always dwelt out of the sight of man, fittingly did she die in the garden's shade, and amid the sweet flowers in which she had lived. Her departure made no noise in the world. The Church went about her common duties, preaching, converting, suffering; there were persecutions, there was fleeing from place to place, there were martyrs, there were triumphs; at length the rumour spread abroad that the Mother of God was no longer upon earth. Pilgrims went to and fro; they sought for her relics, but they found them not; did she die at Ephesus, or did she die at Jerusalem? Reports varied; but her tomb could not be pointed out, or if it was found, it was open; and instead of her pure and fragrant body, there was a growth of lilies from the earth which she had touched. So inquirers went home marvelling, and waiting for further light. And then it was said, how that when her dissolution was at hand, and her soul was to pass in triumph before the judgement-seat of her Son, the apostles were suddenly gathered together in the place, even in the Holy City, to bear part in the joyful ceremonial; how that they buried her with fitting rites; how that the third day, when they came to the tomb, they found it empty, and angelic choirs with their glad voices were heard singing day and night the glories of their risen Queen. But, however we feel towards the details of this history (nor is there anything in it which will be unwelcome or difficult to piety), so much cannot be doubted, from the consent of the whole Catholic world and the revelations made to holy souls, that, as is

befitting, she is, soul and body, with her Son and God in heaven, and that we are enabled to celebrate, not only her death, but her Assumption.

And now, my dear brethren, what is befitting in us, if all that I have been telling you is befitting in Mary? If the Mother of Emmanuel ought to be the first of creatures in sanctity and in beauty; if it became her to be free from all sin from the very first, and from the moment she received her first grace to begin to merit more; and if such as was her beginning, such was her end, her conception immaculate and her death an assumption; if she died, but revived, and is exalted on high; what is befitting in the children of such a Mother, but an imitation, in their measure, of her devotion, her meekness, her simplicity, her modesty, and her sweetness? Her glories are not only for the sake of her Son, they are for our sakes also. Let us copy her faith, who received God's message by the angel without a doubt; her patience, who endured St Joseph's surprise without a word; her obedience, who went up to Bethlehem in the winter and bore Our Lord in a stable; her meditative spirit, who pondered in her heart what she saw and heard about him; her fortitude, whose heart the sword went through; her self-surrender, who gave him up during his ministry and consented to his death.

Above all, let us imitate her purity, who, rather than relinquish her virginity, was willing to lose him for a Son. Oh, my dear children, young men and young women, what need have you of the intercession of the Virgin Mother, of her help, of her pattern, in this

respect! What shall bring you forward in the narrow way, if you live in the world, but the thought and patronage of Mary? What shall seal your senses, what shall tranquillise your heart, when sights and sounds of danger are around you, but Mary? What shall give you patience and endurance, when you are wearied out with the length of the conflict with evil, with the unceasing necessity of precautions, with the irksomeness of observing them, with the tediousness of their repetition, with the strain upon your mind, with your forlorn and cheerless condition, but a loving communion with her? She will comfort you in your discouragements, solace you in your fatigues, raise you after your falls, reward you for your successes. She will show you her Son, your God and your all. When your spirit within you is excited, or relaxed, or depressed, when it loses its balance, when it is restless and wayward, when it is sick of what it has, and hankers after what it has not, when your eye is solicited with evil and your mortal frame trembles under the shadow of the tempter, what will bring you to yourselves, to peace and to health, but the cool breath of the Immaculate and the fragrance of the Rose of Sharon? It is the boast of the Catholic religion that it has the gift of making the young heart chaste; and why is this, but that it gives us Jesus Christ for our food, and Mary for our nursing Mother? Fulfil this boast in yourselves; prove to the world that you are following no false teaching, vindicate the glory of your Mother Mary, whom the world blasphemes, in the very face of the world, by the simplicity of your own deportment, and the sanctity of



your words and deeds. Go to her for the royal heart of innocence. She is the beautiful gift of God, which outshines the fascinations of a bad world, and which no one ever sought in sincerity and was disappointed. She is the personal type and representative image of that spiritual life and renovation in grace, “without which no one shall see God.” “Her spirit is sweeter than honey, and her heritage than the honeycomb. They that eat her shall yet be hungry, and they that drink her shall still thirst. Who so hearkeneth to her shall not be confounded, and they that work by her shall not sin.”

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