

THE ASSUMPTION IN THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN

THE EDITOR



EVERY day for many hundreds of years Christians have centred their minds and hearts upon the person of the Mother of God as assumed bodily into heaven. The devotion of the Rosary has been largely responsible for allowing this 'mystery' to sink deeper and deeper into the spiritual life of the Church; but it had been part of that life long before the devotion of the beads had been instituted. It is indeed one of the very ancient points of prayer for Christians. And now this *lex orandi* has become clearly and definitely the *lex credendi* with the definition from the chair of Peter issued to the whole body of the Church that the assumption of our Lady is an explicit dogma of the faith.

It is to herald this unusual sealing of part of the Church's prayer that this issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT has been prepared. The definition has not been formulated to prevent an error from taking the simple faithful captive—though it has in fact revealed a lack of conviction which must have lain hidden in the prayer of a few Christians—but to set the perfecting seal of authority upon this way of raising the mind and heart to God. It is therefore an important event for the life of the spirit.

It would however be difficult to do justice to every aspect of religion that this doctrine illuminates. And we do not here attempt a complete survey. Some points we would exclude—particularly the controversial issues which have been more than sufficiently aired in the last few weeks; this is not an apologetical symposium. Other points would require a greater detail and length than is feasible in an issue (even a double issue) of a review—the detailed comparison of the Eastern and Western devotions regarding the Dormition and Assumption of our Lady will receive the necessarily careful documentation in some other publication. And finally the actual formulation of the definition will have been published after the preparation of this number has been completed, so that the discussion of the exact import of the words cannot receive space in these pages. But this is less desirable since the purpose of this issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT is to assist the reader to make the most of the newly defined dogma in his life and prayer.

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Thus we are reminded that God respects the work of his hands.

Not only does he not destroy by annihilation what he has created, but where human beings are concerned he never even deals with them merely mechanically. There are those who regard the Incarnation as a sort of machine for life-saving. In their view it was necessary for the Son of God to be born of a woman so that he should be truly man. But 'the womb that bore thee and the paps that gave thee suck' are of little significance or value after their purely physical function has been fulfilled. This is a very superstitious and magical view of God and his work. God having made his future Mother immaculate at her first beginning does not set her on one side when she has accomplished her maternal task. The blood which she gave to her Son was uncontaminated by sin, and it remained her blood too after the birth of Jesus and after he had spilt his own share of that blood in our redemption. This pure unity of body-soul in its perfection is preserved in its wholeness by the one who made it and would not discard it or allow it to disintegrate in corruption. God cares for his creature; he could not treat her as a mere occasion for his saving work any more than he could have used the hunger of the crowd merely to reveal the secret of his divinity.

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The religion that Mary's Son came to establish was one which grew up from the *flesh* of the Word. He even insisted that unless one *ate his flesh* one could not have the new life of his religion. It is easy to forget this fundamental truth, for we all possess a little manichee within us who whispers that true religion is entirely spiritual and that the flesh leads only to corruption. It would be comfortable to regard the Mother of Jesus as an ideal example of perfect motherhood. But God is intent to preserve what he has made and to rescue it from the ideal world. In order to be a mother she had to hear the Word and to keep it, to drag it down from the world of Platonic words that it might be made flesh in her. Similarly we are encouraged to do what we hear him say that we may become also the body of Christ so that in this way the Word should be made flesh in us. So the flesh of Christ is carried in its perfect unity with his soul to heaven at the Ascension, and then the flesh of the Mother too remains through her Assumption as a challenge to those who are horrified by the natural, perhaps too natural, outburst of the woman who admired with such intensity the physical beauty of Mary's Son. So the Church has used her instinctive praise as an official salutation. *Beata viscera Mariae Virginis quae portaverunt aeterni Patris Filium. Et beata ubera quae lactaverunt Christum Dominum.* For this Mother has not seen corruption.

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One of the great needs of the modern world has been increasingly

that of purity won by penance. The visions the Mother has vouchsafed to children at Lourdes, Fatima and elsewhere have always this as their main message—penance and prayer that men may return to the true respect of their own bodies as vessels of election. Speaking of religious life, St Thomas has remarked that all physical mortifications are ordained to the perfection of chastity; so that it is not without significance that our Lady appears on these occasions specifically as 'the immaculate'. The most pure Virgin preaches mortification and penance; for the flesh, if it is to be redeemed and brought within the unity of the sanctified human being, must be mortified flesh, reduced by asceticism to become the vehicle and sharer of the highest mystical experience. Here then in the Assumption is the final fulfilment of the works of penance—not the body slain and corrupted, but the body purified and made a sharer in the beatific vision. In the present age the growing tendency is not only to despise but also to desecrate the human body by impurity and the disregard of the marital vocation with its rights and duties. Now the immaculate, having fulfilled her destiny by the assumption, illuminates the way of the chaste life—by penance to purity; not that she, any more than her Son, had need to be purified, but sharing in his mortification on the Cross her body too has achieved that double crown of the victim.

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Not only then does the definition of the Assumption involve a public demonstration of faith, it also directs attention towards certain specific needs in the modern life of man. And there is one need which modern man is realising with a constantly increasing intensity—the need for 'integration'. Unhappily the disintegrated man, who feels only too well the different forces pulling him to pieces in their various tensions and directions, looks into himself for the secret of recovery. He tries to find with the help of an army of psychiatric advisers the hidden source of disintegration exclusively within his own psyche. Now, in the brilliant light of glory, he is asked to forget for a moment himself and his malaise and to gaze upon the figure of perfect integrity. The Virgin-yet-a-Mother gathers all the emotions and desires, all the secret springs of instinct and awareness, all the conscious movements of the knower and the lover, into the point of beatitude. *Tota pulchra es Maria*; it is the total integrity of the assumed Virgin and Mother that reveals her marvellous beauty. That is the point whence modern man must take his perspective if he is to find the secret of integration—the heavenly vision of God in which the whole of man is called to perfection.

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Indeed here lies the principal need of mankind. Until we return to the contemplative way of life we shall continue to dissipate the treasures of Christianity and culture which the centuries of Christian life have handed down to us. We are pouring out all human resources in the constant rush of mechanised activity. We need, not an inoperative and slothful passivity, but a dynamic life which is wholly centred on the one point—the beatific vision for risen man. That is the last end of man, and therefore it should be this most perfect act of contemplation that gives meaning to every single human activity. For action is specified by its object, and with an object so infinite and so powerful human action should be linking its every experience with heaven. The Virgin Assumed, then, stands as the model of contemplation finally achieved and crowned by God: she stands superior to any particular form of life, be it active or contemplative. She was not contained by any cloister, and yet in the midst of the married life round the simple hearth of Nazareth she remained the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden where she conversed with God in her Son and also in her husband.

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Finally there is hardly need to insist that in a world terrorised by portents of future wars and calamities no greater model for peace could be found than in the person of Mary receiving the fruit of the wholeness of her love on earth. Peace is the fruit of love, and it was our Lady's love that made it impossible for her to be robbed of her peace while yet she remained tranquil on earth amidst the torments and terrors of her Son's enemies and her Son's death. And it was thus that she was gathered to the Father in the perfect manner granted only to her Son and to the special messengers of her Son before her. May the definition of the first of November, 1950, when the Holy Father Pope Pius XII proclaims the truth of the bodily assumption into heaven of the blessed Virgin Mary Mother of God, bring an increase of interior peace to Christian men and remove discord and the fruits of anger and hatred. *Regina pacis, ora pro nobis.*

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THE ILLUSTRATIONS. The 'Swooning of the Virgin' is from the famous fourteenth-century wooden bas-relief of Notre Dame of Louviers. As the devotion to this 'swoon' has long ago been frowned on by the Church as indicative of weakness, these popular representations should be taken as symbolic of the *mystical* death of our Lady, Queen of Martyrs, or yet of her actual death which might be called the swoon of love and contemplation. The Durer 'Assumption' shows the culmination of this death.