

Mary's assumption into heaven

Catholics believe that at the end of her life on this earth Mary was 'assumed', body and soul, into heaven by God. The word 'assumed' comes from the Latin 'assumi', which means 'to be taken'. The belief was declared a dogma by Pope Pius XII in 1950. This is a dogma that has no clear basis in Scripture. Moreover, there is no evidence of such a belief in the first four or so centuries of the Church's existence. So what is the basis for this doctrine?

First of all it was the result of centuries of reflexion on Mary's role in the work of our salvation. From this reflection there emerged a consensus about Mary being the perfect example of a redeemed human being. As the great Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner put it 'Mary in her entire being is already where perfect redemption exists'. This in turn led to her being regarded as a symbol of everything the Church is meant to be. Why Mary was given this honour is due to many reasons. One major reason is her holiness, a holiness that was visible in her submission to God's will. But all the reasons are rooted ultimately in the fact that it was in her womb and with her consent that Christ became a human being, flesh of our flesh. In Mary's body God had become one body with humanity. Unlike the rest of us, she performed a pivotal role by consenting to God's request that she become the mother of Jesus. Unlike her son she was one of the redeemed but unlike us she participated in the very act of God becoming one with us.

Secondly, it is significant that the Eastern Orthodox Church also believes in the doctrine of the Assumption. It represents therefore the unanimous belief of virtually the whole of Christendom for a thousand years prior to the Reformation.

Thirdly, underpinning the above is our confident faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit which gives the Church's tradition an authority that goes beyond mere reliance on the theological expertise of the leaders and theologians of the Church. I dealt with these issues when I spoke about infallibility.

So much for the basis of the doctrine of the Assumption. Let's now look at what it means.

In reflecting on the doctrine of the Assumption the first thing that needs to be noted is that what we are talking about here is Mary enjoying the resurrection of the body. Her resurrection is called an 'assumption' because people used to believe that heaven was up in the sky somewhere and that therefore Mary's risen body had to be taken up there.

What happened to Mary, then, was not something peculiar or unique to her. On the contrary it is what happened to Jesus on Easter Sunday and is what we believe will happen to all of us who die in Christ: viz., the resurrection of the body. The only difference between Mary and the rest of the redeemed is that she was seen as enjoying her resurrection already, while the rest of us had to wait until the end of time. The traditional explanation for this difference was that it was a fitting tribute to Mary's outstanding holiness and closeness to Jesus. Put more crudely, theologians used to argue that since Mary was never under the dominion of sin, her body should never see corruption but rather be transformed immediately into the glory of a risen body, just as her Son's body was transformed at his death.

Mary – and her Son, I suppose – would stand out as exceptions to the law that our resurrection will occur at the end of time. However, a growing number of theologians are arguing that *all* who die in the Lord experience their resurrection immediately after death (having done whatever may have been necessary to purify their love, a process we call Purgatory). This position does not contradict the dogma since it is not part of the *dogma* that *only* Mary experienced her resurrection immediately after death.

It would take too long to give you all the arguments in favour of such an idea. But one of the arguments is based on the belief I referred to earlier, namely that Mary is the symbol of all that Christ's grace has done for us, the symbol of all that the Church is meant to be. Thus, her Immaculate Conception can be seen as the sign that we are all born into a redeemed world, one already filled with God's grace thanks to Christ becoming part of it. Her virginity's importance was not that she didn't have sex but rather that with her began what has been called the new creation, in which she symbolises a new Eve and her son symbolises a new Adam. And finally her Assumption can be seen as the sign that we all experience the fullness of the risen life at the moment of our deaths.

Finally, let me say something on what we mean by a resurrected body (*for what follows see my book **God is a Community**, Unisa Press, pp. 359ff*).

First of all, the *essence of the doctrine* is that human beings are destined not to lose their humanity but to experience its transformation and perfection. We are creatures that communicate and live

through the energy structures of the universe. We are part of the material universe and Christianity has traditionally believed that it will be as part of the material universe that we will be saved and brought to our final perfection.

However, the resurrection *does not imply a return to the spatio-temporal conditions of this life*. Our resurrection is modelled on Jesus' one. Our bodies, we are told, will be 'copies' of his (Phil 3:21).

But *is a risen body not then a contradiction in terms?* Is it not a contradiction to talk of something as 'bodily' and yet as 'transcending the limits of space and time'? Here I must confess to being in an area that requires a level of expertise in physics that I lack. However, physicists have observed that the present laws of physics are not the only possible ones. There could be quite different laws. If so, then it is at least theoretically possible that the energy that makes up the present material universe could express itself in ways that transcend the present laws of space and time. What this could mean is that a risen body is energy in a form with which we are unfamiliar and cannot imagine. But the fact that we cannot imagine it does not mean that it is intrinsically impossible. One could appeal to the analogy of the variety of ways in which energy structures itself even within our spatio-temporally bound universe. The same sub-atomic particles are the basis of all forms of matter. But on one level they form bricks, on another level they form plant life, on another level they form animal life and on another level they form human life with its self-consciousness and ability to think and love (Paul makes a similar point in 1 Cor 15:39ff). One could conceive of the risen body as being yet another – perhaps final – level on which these particles of energy express themselves.

Will the risen body be the same as the one that was buried? Will you get your favourite beauty spot back? Before answering this we need to be clear about what we mean by 'the same as'. If we mean that the risen body is made out of the same bits of matter that our earthly bodies had, then we must deny that the risen body is the same as the one that was buried. There are several reasons why (in my view) we must draw that conclusion. Let me mention two. First of all, there are no such things as bits of my body that remain the same. Every cell is changed in my body every seven years. Secondly, when a body dies it corrupts in the ground. It and its bones could, for example, be eaten by an animal. It now becomes part of the body of that animal. Then a human being comes along, kills and eats the animal. That human being is eventually killed by another animal who feasts on the

corpse. Along comes another human being and eats that animal. At the time of the resurrection who do the bits belong to?!

A risen body therefore is not constituted out of the bits and pieces of my earthly body. What I call 'my body' is really the energy structures through which I express myself and through which I communicate with the world around me. A risen body can be viewed simply as a *new form* of energy through which I express myself and through which I communicate with the world around me, a form of energy that transcends the present limitations of space and time. The fact that it is *me* expressing myself through this new form of energy *makes it **my** body*.

Finally, *what is the purpose of a risen body?* In my view, its purpose is not merely to increase our happiness at getting our bodies back. But I cannot see how a risen body could increase substantially our ecstatic love life in heaven. I believe that the basic reason for the extent of the transformation that is required for a 'risen body' is as follows: to enable the closest possible unity to exist between God and neighbour. It will be a unity that will enable us to be in each other as Jesus and the Father are in each other. It will be a unity that will be possible only in a world from which not only sin but also the present limitations of space and time are banished. Love, as we saw, unites and by uniting transforms all that it unites so that there may be no obstacle to the greatest possible unity. The risen life is, then, the final transformation brought about by Love – God's Love creating and then responding to our love. It is in the risen life that we see Jesus' prayer answered to its fullest extent: 'Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you' (Jn 17:21).

This means that Mary can live within us just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do. Her assumption into heaven means that in her gloriously transformed body she not only enjoys the closest possible unity with Father, Son and Spirit but also with us.