

The Assumption of Mary

The origin of the feast and dogma of the Assumption

In the Eastern Church, the dormition ("falling asleep") of Mary began to be commemorated in the 6th century. The observance gradually spread to the West, where it became known as the feast of the Assumption. By the 13th century, most Catholic theologians accepted the belief of the Assumption. However this doctrine did not become an article of faith until recent times, when Pope Pius XII declared it a dogma of the Catholic faith: "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" (*Munificentissimus Deus*, Pope Pius XII, 1950).

Not taught in Scripture

Catholic authors readily admit that the Assumption is not explicitly taught in Scripture. In the biblical narrative, Mary is last mentioned in Acts 1 where she is found praying with the other disciples before Pentecost. After that, the Bible is silent about her life and death.

Naturally Catholic writers refer to various scriptures to demonstrate the possibility of this doctrine, and that it is was 'fitting' that Mary should be assumed to heaven. For example, it is argued that bodily assumption is the natural effect of Mary being "full of grace." However, the same word translated "full of grace" (Greek, *charitoo*) is applied to *all believers* in Ephesians 1:6. Yet, nobody suggests that every believer should be assumed bodily into heaven soon after death!

Pope Pius XII commented, "Often there are theologians and preachers who, following in the footsteps of the holy Fathers, have been *rather free* in their use of events and expressions taken from Sacred Scripture to explain their belief in the Assumption." Yet he still based his argument on *these* writings, thereby conceding that there is no solid biblical proof of the Assumption.

Not taught by the Church Fathers

The Catholic Encyclopaedia admits that the first "genuine" written reference to the Assumption come from St Gregory of Tours who lived in the sixth century. Thus for several centuries in the early Church, there is no mention by the church fathers of the bodily assumption of Mary. Ireneus, Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose and the others church fathers said nothing about it. Writing in 377 A.D., the church father Epiphanius states that no-one knows Mary's end.

First taught by heretics

So, how did this teaching originate, given that it is absent in the Sacred Scriptures and in the tradition of the early Church? The belief of the assumption is based on apocryphal and spurious writings.

"The belief in the corporeal assumption of Mary is founded on the apocryphal treatise *De Obitu S. Dominae*, bearing the name of St. John, which belongs however to the fourth or fifth century. It is also found in the book *De Transitu Virginis*, falsely ascribed to St. Melito of Sardis, and in a spurious letter attributed to St. Denis the Areopagite" (*Catholic Encyclopaedia*).

The first church author to speak on the assumption, Gregory of Tours, based his teaching on the *Transitus*, perhaps because he accepted it as genuine. However, in 459 A.D. Pope Gelasius issued a

decree that officially condemned and rejected the *Transitus* along with several other heretical writings. Pope Hormisdas reaffirmed this decree in the sixth century. It is ironic, that this heretical teaching was later promoted within the Catholic Church, until eventually it was proclaimed a dogma in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

The Roman Church solemnly warns anyone who “should dare willfully to deny or to call into doubt that which we have defined (i.e. the Assumption), let him know that he has *fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic Faith (Munificentissimus Deus)*. How could this dogma be so important, seeing that it was unknown in the early Church, even condemned by two Popes, and more importantly, since it is absent from the Holy Scriptures? Some have indeed fallen from the catholic faith. The apostates are those who have invented this novel doctrine. The faithful are those who, together with the early Christians, have remained steadfast in upholding the faith of the New Testament.