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SERVICE OF OUR LADY AND THE CHURCH

Feast of the Assumption 15 August 1977

Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10b
1 Corinthians 15:20-26
Luke 1:39-56

... this loving gesture of your presence¹ and, above all, your prayers for this your servant who feels overwhelmed by the people's affection. For this reason I am willing to continue to serve you during the years that God may give me. I consider this new deacon that we are going to ordain today to be a wonderful birthday gift that the church is giving me.

The dogma of the assumption of Mary

This great feast of the archdiocese takes on an enchanting aspect within the mystery we are celebrating today in the cathedral. The assumption of the Virgin into heaven in body and soul is not a pious opinion. It is a dogma of faith, the most recent one to be declared. The declaration occurred at the conclusion of the holy year in 1950. That year brought many pilgrims to Rome, and they were received there by the great pontiff, Pius XII. During the preceding years an interesting consultation was made with all the bishops of the world: what do the people think about this belief that Mary was taken up into heaven in body and soul? At the same time the Pope examined the liturgical traditions, the theology, and the various studies that had been done by the church. He wanted to be certain. Then, on November 1 of that holy year he proclaimed as a dogma of faith that Mary, after concluding her mortal life here on earth, was assumed—was taken up—body and soul by God. As Catholics we therefore have an obligation to believe this. It might be asked why a truth relating to the origins of Christianity and the origins of Christ himself was only now in our time proclaimed a dogma of faith. Certainly Pius XII did not invent in 1950 the idea of Mary being assumed body and soul into heaven. The pope does not create dogmas. What the pope does is place the seal of his authority and his teaching power on a certain truth to assure the faithful that the truth is contained in divine revelation. We believe the truth not just because the Holy Father has spoken but above all because God has spoken and has revealed it to us in the Holy Bible and in the living tradition of the church. Thus, the truth we celebrate is not one invented by human beings.

With the certainty of true Catholic faith we feel today a profound joy because Mary is in heaven not only in spirit, as are all our beloved departed, but also with her glorified body. She is there in that definitive form in which we also will be glorified

¹ The greeting and opening words were not recorded on the tape of this homily.

when that dogma of our creed is fulfilled: «I believe in the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of the flesh». God left the definition of this dogma to the 1900s, this century so much inclined toward materialism, as Pope Paul VI said, «This Council is telling us of a God and a kingdom of heaven, while men are speaking about earthly kingdoms and earthly conquests».²

The message of this day is most opportune because this journey of Mary in body and soul to heaven is a vibrant sign for all humankind. It tells them that the destiny of the human soul that seeks true happiness is not here on earth. There is a definitive kingdom of heaven beyond our earthly life, but this kingdom is gained only by working in this life and committing ourselves to the fulfillment of God's plan, just as Mary made her earthly life a precise fulfillment of God's plan and an intimate collaboration with the Divine Redeemer in saving the world. That is why the Second Vatican Council, in taking up the dogma of the assumption for our more recent times, tells us that Mary, assumed body and soul into heaven, becomes there in the definitive kingdom the model and principle of a church which is to be totally glorified (LG 68). In other words, this church that continues on pilgrimage among earthly persecutions and sorrows looks to Mary and contemplates her own immortal destiny in her. The church is encouraged to suffer all these pains and persecutions because she knows that God, through this pain as with the pain of Mary, is shaping the living stones of that glorious temple where God will reign forever in all his majesty and beauty.

Mary, then, is the first to be glorified in that heavenly kingdom of which we will all become part in our glorified bodies if after the final judgment we have the happiness of being saved as she was. At the same time, the Council, reflecting on this heavenly perspective where Mary shines forth in all her beauty, looks back to earth and says: this Virgin, now in heaven in body and soul, is not only a figure of our eternal destiny but is also «a sign of sure hope and solace for the pilgrim people of God» (LG 68). What a beautiful definition of Mary: «a sign of sure hope and solace». Thus, as we journey here on earth, as we walk along the dusty and muddy roads of this world, as we undergo the concrete tribulations of life, let us look toward Mary, our sure hope.

The service of the Virgin Mary and the church

My sisters and brothers, I want to highlight a still more specific teaching of this dogma, namely, that Mary and our pilgrim church are providing a service. I want to stress the word «service» because we are about to ordain a deacon, and the word «deacon» derives from the Greek word *diakonia*, which means «service».³ Since the early Christian community grew very quickly, the apostles were unable to serve all the needs of the increasing numbers. Thus, the people of God chose seven virtuous men and presented them to the apostles (Acts 6:1-7). When the apostles laid hands on them, the Spirit of God came upon them to make them close collaborators with the apostles. They were called deacons, that is, servants of God's people. The first seven deacons are recorded in the Bible. This order of collaboration was established in those early days, but it has taken on new relevance now because we need so many hands in these days when «the harvest is abundant but the laborers are few» (Luke 10:2), when the authorities are

² PAUL VI, «The Religious Value of the Council», Allocution at the closing session of the Second Vatican Council (7 December 1965) 4.

³ In this Mass Archbishop Romero conferred the diaconate on the seminarian Jorge Benavides.

persecuting us and expelling priests, when communities are left without priests to serve them. We need virtuous men who are willing to commit themselves to wholehearted service of the church. Let them receive the Holy Spirit and give the church the service that is so characteristic of them.

I remember when Pope Paul VI visited the United Nations. In the midst of that gathering of the powerful rulers of the world, he told them, «You who are here in this assembly are accustomed to resolve great problems. I bring you only one request: allow me to serve you. The church is present as a servant among the nations that you represent».⁴ That is the church: a servant. How does the church serve? It serves in the same way that Mary, assumed into heaven, serves humankind, because Mary and the church cannot be separated from one another.

How does the church serve? She serves first by pointing out to people their eternal destiny. Thus, from the heavenly light she illuminates the dignity and the rights of the human person. That is why she is steadfast in defending the dignity, the freedom, and the rights of the human person: she knows that men and women are not playthings but are destined, like Mary, for the kingdom of heaven. They are children of God who sojourn on this earth, but their destiny is not this earth. That is the great service that the church provides first of all. Like Mary, assumed body and soul into heaven, the church tells all bodies and all souls about the sublime destiny of humanity. On this day especially, that is the church's message to the world: the church presents to the world a Virgin, a womanly body ascending to heaven with all her feminine beauty crowned by the beauty of God. From heaven this Virgin tells all men and women what a high destiny the human body has.

In what other ways do Mary and the church serve? Mary is attentive to the hopes of humankind and tells people that their hope is certain. If she, a child of this earth, has been assumed by God and placed on a throne in heaven, then it is possible for all human flesh to live with this same hope. Therefore, as we continue our pilgrimage here on earth, may we be firm in our resolve and not grow discouraged in the midst of persecutions. On this occasion, sisters and brothers, I want to thank all of you who have written me such wonderful letters for they inspire me with great hope. You say that the church keeps your hope alive. This is a beautiful confession coming from those who suffer, from families experiencing persecution, from communities that find the reason for their preaching in the sure hope that the church transmits, because it is Mary who transmits this message to the church. Mary and the church know that this hope comes from Christ's redemption, for Mary has not been assumed into heaven by her own merits just as the church does not accomplish anything by her own efforts. Both Mary and the church are nothing more than instruments and marvelous reflections of Christ's redemption.

Mary, assumed body and soul into heaven, is proclaiming, like Saint Paul, that «the last enemy to be destroyed is death» (1 Cor 15:26). If death is destroyed by Mary's victorious assumption into heaven, then in all of us the hope remains alive, even though death may seem to extinguish our life, because our life is sustained by the Spirit of God who has made us immortal and will make us rise up from our graves.

⁴ PAULVI, Discourse to the General Assembly of the United Nations (4 October 1965) 6.

Finally, the church, like Mary, serves humankind by affirming that every person is a child of God, a sister or a brother to be cared for. Mary never tires of offering her protection; she extends her hand as mother and queen and guides us along the path of duty that leads to heaven. The church is doing the same thing on earth as well. She encourages people to fulfill their obligations, to put aside their sinful ways, and to live their true dignity as children of God. The church protects her children to the extent that her merits on earth allow, and Mary in heaven also protects them for she is all-powerful through prayer.

On this day let us lift up our eyes to Mary, sisters and brothers, and as members of a church that is Mary's twin sister let us place our trust in this powerful Virgin who lives and reigns in heaven in body and soul. She makes her power felt through our pilgrim church with all the beauty of a princess who walks toward her kingdom and hopes for the revelation of her greatness. That is why the institutional church is composed of pope, bishops, priests, deacons, lay ministers, religious, catechists, and celebrators of the word—we are all the church as institution. Let us not become discouraged. Rather, let us recognize that the armor of God in the world bears the immortal spirit of Mary. Let us earnestly cultivate this devotion to Mary.

My dear deacon, we are going to impose hands on you, and we will see in you as deacon an image of this servant church. May you understand that all your theology, all your studies, and the beauty of your vocation are meant to help you bring to the world the face of this church that serves and loves and hopes. Through our episcopal authority we are going to transmit to you the same powers that the apostles transmitted to the first seven of your companions. That order of deacons has multiplied in the course of history, and they have written some beautiful pages in the church's story. We are now going to incorporate you into this order.