

SERVICE OF OUR LADY AND THE CHURCH

Feast of the Assumption August 15, 1977

Revelation 11:19a, 12:1-6, 10b
1 Corinthians 15:20-26
Luke 1:39-59

...this loving gesture of your presence¹ and above all, your prayers for this servant of yours, overwhelms me with an even greater love for you. I am willing to continue to serve you during the years that God gives me. I consider this new deacon that we are going to ordain, that the Church ordains --- I consider this the best birthday gift.

The Assumption of Mary

In light of the mystery that we reflect on today, how can we recover the meaning of this feast that we now celebrate in the cathedral of the Archdiocese? The Assumption of the Virgin, body and soul, into heaven is not a pious opinion. It is a dogma of faith, and the most recent dogma to be formally declared as such by the magisterium of the Church. This occurred at the conclusion of the Holy Year, 1950, that brought many pilgrims to Rome. The great Pontiff, Pius XII, received these pilgrims. During this time, he consulted all the bishops of the world: what do the people think about this belief that Mary, in body and soul, has been taken up into heaven? At the same time the Pope examined the liturgical traditions and theology and various studies that had been done by the Church. He wanted to be certain. Then, on November 1st of that Holy Year, he proclaimed as a dogma of faith (therefore, we have an obligation, as Catholics, to believe this) that Mary, after having concluded her life here on earth, was assumed, was taken up, body and soul, by God. It might be asked why is a truth that corresponds to the origins of Christianity and the origins of Christ himself, only now, in our time, proclaimed a dogma of faith? Did Pius XII invent the fact that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven? The Pope does not invent dogma. The Pope places his seal of authority and the seal of his teaching on certain beliefs and thus guarantees the faithful that this specific truth is contained in Divine Revelation. We believe this truth, not because the Holy Father has spoken, but because God has spoken, and revealed this to us in Sacred Scripture and the living tradition of the Church. We celebrate a truth that is not invented by humankind.

Yet with the surety of a true Catholic faith, we feel a profound joy today because Mary is in heaven, not only in spirit, as are all those who have died, but with a glorified body. She is there in this definitive form that will also be ours at the time of our glorification, at the time when this dogma of our creed is fulfilled: *I believe in the resurrection of the dead*, the resurrection of the flesh. God left the actualization of this dogma to the XX Century, to this century so much inclined toward materialism. Pope Paul VI said: *This Council is not speaking of a God and a kingdom of heaven while men are speaking about kingdoms on earth and conquests of the earth²*.

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 and tells them that the destiny of their soul is not here, on earth. For those people who seek true happiness, there is a definitive Kingdom of Heaven, a life beyond our life, but this kingdom is obtained by working in this life and committing oneself to the fulfillment of God's plan. Mary made her earthly life a precise fulfillment of God's plan and an intimate collaboration with the Divine Redeemer in saving the world. Thus, when Vatican II takes up the matter of the assumption, it states: *In the bodily and spiritual glory which she possesses in heaven, the Mother of Jesus continues in this present world as the image and first flowering of the Church as she is to be perfected in the world to come* (a). In other words, this Church that is on pilgrimage among the persecutions and sorrows of the earth looks to Mary and contemplates in Mary her immortal destiny. She is encouraged to suffer all these pains and persecutions because she knows that God, through this pain (like he did with Mary's pain), is molding those living stones for that glorious temple where God will reign forever in majesty and beauty.

Mary is the first to be glorified in that heavenly kingdom, that place where we will follow her in our own glorified bodies, that is, if we have the happiness of being saved like her, after the time of the final judgment. As the Council reflected on this heavenly perspective where Mary shines forth in all her beauty and yet bends toward the 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* (b). As we journey here on earth across the dusty and muddy roads of the world, as we journey in the midst of concrete, everyday tribulations, let us look toward Mary, our certain hope.

The service of Mary and the Church

My sisters and brothers, I want to highlight a very concrete teaching of this dogma. As Mary and the Church are on their pilgrimage, they are presenting us with a model of service. I want to underline this word because we are about to ordain a deacon and the word *deacon* means *service*³. As the primitive Christian community continued to grow, the Apostles were unable to serve all the needs of the community. Thus, the People of God elected seven virtuous men who were then presented to the Apostles (c). The Apostles laid hands on them and the Spirit of God filled these men who became intimate collaborators with the Apostles. They were deacons, servants. Scripture tells us that these men were the first deacons. At that time, this order of collaboration was established, and now in our time, it has recovered its original significance of service. Today, we need many arms *because the harvest is abundant but the laborers are few* (d). We need many arms because we are persecuted and our priests are imprisoned and exiled and many communities have no resident priest. We need virtuous men who are willing to commit themselves whole-heartedly to the Church. Receive the Holy Spirit and come and give the Church this service.

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: *In this place you are accustomed to resolve great problems. I bring you one request, allow me to serve you. The Church is in the midst of the people you represent as a servant*⁴. The Church is a servant. How does the Church serve? It serves in the same way that Mary, assumed into heaven, is serving humankind, because Mary and the Church cannot be separated from one another.

How does Mary serve? In the first place, she points out to humankind their eternal destiny. Thus, from this light in heaven, she illuminates the dignity and the rights of the

human person. For this reason, she is steadfast in defending the dignity, freedom and the rights of the human person, because she knows that men and women are not puppets, but are destined, like Mary, for the kingdom of Heaven. Thus, as children of God, men and women journey here on earth, but their destiny is not here, in this world. This, then, is the service that the Church provides. For like Mary, who was assumed body and soul into heaven, the Church speaks to all bodies and souls and tells them they have an exalted and high destiny.

Today's message for the world is accomplished by presenting Mary in the body of a woman who is assumed into heaven with all her feminine beauty and there is consumed by the beauty of God. From that position, 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 bows before 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 during this time of persecution. May we have that sure and certain hope that our ultimate destiny will not be found here on earth. My sisters and brothers, I want to thank you, and so many of you are listening to me now on radio, and all those persons who have sent me such beautiful letters. They inspire me with great hope. You say in your letters that the Church continues to give you hope. This is a beautiful profession that comes from men and women who suffer and whose homes are persecuted. The communities understand our preaching and find a sure and certain hope in the message that the Church transmits. Yet, Mary transmits this message to the Church. Mary and the Church know that this hope comes from Christ's redemption, because Mary has not been assumed into heaven because of her own merits and the Church does not work and rely on her own efforts. Mary and the Church are only instruments and beautiful 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* (e). So if Mary overcame death by being assumed victoriously into heaven, then all of us can hope that, even though death will extinguish our life, yet that life will continue to make itself known, even in the grave. For our life is supported and nourished by the Spirit of God who has made us immortal and will raise us from our graves.

Finally, the Church, like Mary, serves humankind by affirming the fact that every man and woman is a child of God, a sister and a brother that must be attended. Mary continually protects her children and with outstretched arms of a mother and queen, she guides us along the paths that lead to heaven. The earthly Church is doing the same thing. She encourages men and women to fulfill their obligations, to put aside their sinful ways and to live their true dignity as children of God. She protects her children as much as she can and Mary in heaven, who is all-powerful through prayer, also protects her children.

My sisters and brothers, today let us lift up our eyes to Mary and as members of the Church, Mary's twin sister, let us place our trust in this powerful Virgin who lives and reigns in heaven in body and soul. As Church, let us continue our pilgrimage here on earth. Let us continue our pilgrimage with the beauty of a princess who walks toward the kingdom and hopefully awaits the revelation of her true greatness. As members of this institutional Church, composed of Pope, bishops, priests, deacons, lay ministers, women religious, catechists, preachers of God's Word, let us not become discouraged. Let us recognize that

the armor of God in the world bears the immortal spirit of Mary. Therefore, let us continue to promote devotion to Mary.

My beloved deacon, we are going to impose hands on you and we will see in you an image of this Servant Church, the deacon. May you understand that all your theology, all your studies, and the beauty of your vocation means that you present 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 deacons. Throughout history their number multiplied and they have written some beautiful pages in the Church's history. We are now going to incorporate you into this body of the Church's deacons.

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

² Paul VI, Address at the closing session of Vatican II, 17 December 1965, 4.

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

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

Margin References (a) LG 68: (b) LG 68: (c) Ac 6,1-7: (d) Lk 10,2: (e) 1 Cor 15,26.