

The Dormition and Assumption of the BVM

15 August, 2021, Pusey House, the Principal

Isaiah 61.10, Revelation 11.19-12.6, Luke 1.46-55

For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.

This image from Isaiah is one of fruitfulness and expectation. In the early Church, these passages of the earth bringing forth her bud, of good things springing from the earth, were often seen as metaphors or symbols given by God. The earth is like the humanity formed from the dust, and this good earth is like the mother of God, the BVM, from whom God the Son takes earthy-flesh: ***righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations*** when the Son of God, fully human, fully God, is born of the Virgin Mary for all peoples and nations. Today, We are invited to rejoice in what the Divine Son does and accomplishes, but we are also invited to rejoice that we are invited as sons and daughters of God to dwell in the Garden.

There is a similar two-fold aspect in the celebration of the Dormition, the Falling Asleep, and the Assumption of the BVM, the Mother of God. This festival is first a festival of thanksgiving for the work of our salvation. In the words of a Eric Mascall:

‘The creation of the world was brought about by the sole fiat [decree and command,] of God [and God said: ‘let there be light’]; the re-creation of the world was, by God’s dispensation, set in motion by the fiat [, the self-dedication and active obedient decision] of a young village girl who was engaged to a carpenter.’¹

And Mary said, Be it unto me according to thy word.

God the Holy Trinity chose the Blessed Virgin Mary to be an essential part of the work of our redemption. It is staggering to contemplate that Almighty God waited upon the ‘yes’ of faith and hope of a young unknown woman. We cannot come to Christ and yet bypass Mary. If there had not been such debate in the life of the Church about other beliefs associated with BVM, it would be easier to appreciate how incredible and wonderful is her role in the work of our salvation. This celebration is also a festival of hope, as we celebrate the working out of the gift of life in Christ in BVM, in Church, and in our lives.

One Orthodox hymn of praise for this festival contains these two aspects of thanksgiving and hope:

The spotless Bride, the Mother of Him in Whom the Father was well pleased, she who was preordained by God to be the dwelling place of His union of two natures without confusion.

Everything we say and celebrate about the Mother of God comes from this basic fact – She is ‘the Mother of Him in Whom the Father was well pleased’. The unique character of Mary’s role was summed up in the term ‘Theotokos’, God-bearer, at the third ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431. This title is about the person of Jesus Christ, not

¹ E. L. Mascall, ‘The Dogmatic Theology of the Mother of God’. In *The Mother of God: A Symposium by Members of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius*, ed by E L Mascall, Dacre Press, Westminster, 1949, 37-50, p. 39.

first about the dignity of Mary. The title Mother of God, Theotokos, was meant to make it clear that Jesus was not a man in whom God had come to take up residence, a man with a particularly close connection with God (Nestorianism). No, this man is truly God, God living a human life, true God, true human being- and this makes the BVM the Theotokos, the Mother of God.²

The hymn continues:

The spotless Bride, ...
today delivers her blameless soul to her Creator and her God.
The spiritual powers receive her with the honors due to God,
and she who is truly the Mother of Life departs to life,
the lamp of the unapproachable Light//
the salvation of the faithful and the hope of our souls.

According to this text, the BVM first dyes, whereupon the divine Son comes to receive her soul . Next, from another text, ‘The highest Powers of heaven’, the Angels, come to ‘escort’ ‘the inviolate body, the body that had received God in the flesh./ In a manner beyond this world ...’³

But these text do not only celebrate the work of grace in the BVM, they also describe her resurrection and ascension as ‘the salvation of the faithful and hope of our souls’. How do we make sense of this claim, how do we rejoice in this hope?

In 1950 Pope Pius XII declared it to be a matter of revealed dogma that ‘the Immaculate Mother of God the Ever-Virgin Mary, having completed her earthly course, was in body and soul assumed into heavenly glory’.⁴ For many, in the C of E and beyond, this promulgation was wrong and triumphalist. One of the great English divines of the last century, Austin Farrer, Warden of Keble College, in 1960 in a sermon in this chapel, ‘On being an Anglican’, criticized the pope’s declaration in strong terms. Farrer stated that ‘the papal fact-factory has been going full blast in our own time, manufacturing sacred history after the event.’⁵

² For a consideration of the title ‘Theotokos’ and ‘Mother of God’, See Eric Mascall, ‘The Mother of God’, in *Mary’s Place in Christian Dialogue: Occasional Papers of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1970–1980*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole, (Middlegreen, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1982), p. 93, on ‘Theotokos’, p. 92.

³ By the divine command the God-bearing Apostles were caught up by clouds from every place. When they came to thine all-pure body, the source of Life, they kissed it most reverently. The highest Powers of heaven were also present with their Master, and seized with awe they escorted the inviolate body, the body that had received God in the flesh. In a manner beyond this world they went before it and invisibly cried out to the ranks above them: “Behold, the Queen of all, the Child of God, has come! Lift up your gates, and in a manner beyond this world receive the Mother of the everlasting Light, for through her was accomplished the salvation of all the mortal race! We cannot gaze upon her, nor is it possible to render honor worthy of her, for her excellence surpasses all understanding.” Therefore, O immaculate Theotokos, who livest forever with thy Son, the life-bearing King, pray ceaselessly to Him to preserve the new people of God, and to save them from every hostile assault, for we have acquired thine intercession,// and to the ages, in manifest splendor, we call thee blessed.

⁴ Quoted in John Seward, ‘The Assumption’, *Mary’s Place in Christian Dialogue*, p. 108 ff.

⁵ Farrer, ‘On Being an Anglican’, *The End of Man*, p. 50. Referring to ‘the great Papal error’, Farrer writes: ‘Its infallibilist claim is a blasphemy, and never has been accepted by the oriental part of Christendom. Its authority has been employed to establish as dogmas of faith, propositions utterly lacking in historical foundation. Nor is this an old or faded scandal – the papal fact-factory has been going full blast in our own time, manufacturing sacred history after the event.’ Jeremy Morris reflects on Farrer’s words and their place in twentieth century Anglo-Catholicism in *The High Church Revival in the Church*

For others, in making the Assumption a dogma of the Church, the pope was only giving voice to the faith of the Church and the catholic tradition from the early, if not the earliest, ages.⁶ The eastern tradition names this feast Mary's "falling-asleep," her "Dormition". However, the Orthodox liturgy also witnesses to the belief that Mary was assumed into heaven, that three days, or perhaps many days, after undergoing a natural death in the presence of the Apostles, her body was resurrected and taken up to heaven.⁷

The absence of an historical foundation is also acknowledged by those who hold firmly to the doctrine of the Assumption.⁸ This does not mean that belief in the Assumption of the BVM has no historical basis or origin. It is highly significant that in a world where relics brought wealth as well as spiritual treasure, that no churches have claimed to have any relics of the body of the BVM.⁹

For R. Catholic theologians, "the Assumption is not the object of a *historical* tradition of *apostolic origin*, but of a dogmatic explication rooted in reflection on the whole of revelation."¹⁰ In this view, it is a dogma which fits with what we know: 'Rather than being manifested publicly in a manner accessible to historians, Mary's Assumption was an event whose historical reality the Holy Spirit taught the Church over time'.¹¹

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware offers a characteristic Orthodox view. On the one hand, he is critical of the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption. For him, the Assumption is not a dogma, not 'an object of faith', but 'a foundation of our hope, a fruit of faith, ripened in tradition'.¹² The Church ought not to seek to present as an object of certain faith or dogma a mystery about which the Scriptures and the early tradition is silent.¹³ 'St Basil's warning is not to be forgotten: "Let things ineffable be honoured in silence"'. Some forms of knowledge are marred when they are presented as an analysable fact rather than as an invitation. On the other hand, says Bp Kallistos, the celebration of the Assumption 'is not to be regarded as a further truth added to the truths already found in

of England (Brill: Leiden, 2016), chapter 8, 'Scripture and History: Mary and the Nature of Doctrine', pp. 219-34.

⁶ Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, *Daughter Zion*, on the absence of the witness to such a doctrine before the 6th c, p. 72.

⁷ While the older traditions in the West also maintain that Mary died a natural death before her Assumption, the liturgical texts and the papal promulgation of 1950 are ambiguous, saying only that Mary 'completed her earthly course', a mode of expression which leaves open the possibility that she was taken up into heaven without dying.

⁸ There are no reliable accounts of the end of the BVM's life, and even questions about the end of her life seem to emerge only at the end of the 4th century. See Stephen J. Shoemaker, chapter 2, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, OUP, 2003.

⁹ To say, as Pope Benedict and Eric Mascall did, that the foundation of the belief is theological does not mean either that the Assumption relies on the witness of tradition, that what was believed and handed on, supplies what the Bible does not. Rather, to say that it is theological means, firstly, that it fits with what we know of the Mother's relation to the Son—that it makes sense, that it has the character of inner conviction rather than hard evidence. This theological emphasis also supplies the possibility of building a bridge between those who disagree about whether or not the Assumption can be or should be a matter of faith.

¹⁰ René Laurentin, *A Short Treatise on the Virgin Mary*, trans. Charles Neumann, S.M. (Washington, NJ: AMI Press, 1991), 248 in Matthew Levering, *Mary's Bodily Assumption*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2014, first page of his introduction.

¹¹ Levering, first page of his introduction.

¹² Quoting Evdokimov and Lossky, in 'The Sanctity and Glory of the Mother of God: Orthodox Approaches', *The Way*, Supplement 51, *Papers of the 1984 International Congress of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (1984), 79-96, p. 94.

¹³ Ware, p. 94. 'The realities of this world are expressed through speech, says St Isaac the Syrian, but the mysteries of the age to come can be expressed only through silence'.

Scripture. Rather, it is the fruit of the assimilation of those Scriptural truths under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.’¹⁴

Let us return to the title which the Church has given Mary since the early ages --- Theotokos, Mother of God. From the early ages of the Church, Mary has been described as a New Eve, a New mother of all the living.¹⁵ We can say with Justin Martyr or Irenaeus that as ‘the knot of Eve’s disobedience received its unloosing through the obedience of Mary. What Eve, a virgin, bound by not-believing, Mary, a virgin, unloosed by believing.’¹⁶ Mary, is the mother of Him in whom we have life, she is the new Eve, the new mother of all the living.

‘the Christian returning from his communion can repeat in a totally new sense that words of Adam, ‘The woman gave me and I did eat’.¹⁷ In the striking words of Eric Mascall: ‘Mary is still the human mother of the human Christ’.¹⁸ In carrying Christ in her womb, Mary carries in herself this future, she bears those who will have life in Christ.¹⁹ If Mary, remains the mother of Christ, she also has this relationship to us in and through her son. On the one hand, Mary is our mother, and Mary is the Church’s mother, on the other hand, the Church is our mother, the mother of all the living. ‘So there is a peculiar kind of typological interchange between Mary and the Church’.²⁰

We see this interchange in the lesson from the book of Revelation this morning, chapter 12. St John sees a woman in heaven, ‘a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars’. On the one hand, this woman is described as the mother of Christ: ‘And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.’ In two other places in the same book of Revelation, the one who ‘rules with a rod of iron’ is a title for the ascended and glorified Christ. On the other hand, this woman appears to

¹⁴ Kallistos Ware, ‘The Mother of God in Orthodox Theology and Devotion’, in *Mary’s Place in Christian Dialogue*, 169– 81, p. 179.

¹⁵ E. B. Pusey, Lenten *Sermons*, ‘Eve: The Course of Temptation’, ‘She was the Mother of our Redeemer, and so from her, as the fountain of His human Birth came all which He did, and was, and is to us. She, being the Mother of Him Who is our Life, became the Mother of Life; she was the Gate of Paradise, because she bore Him Who restored to us our lost Paradise; she was “the gate of Heaven,” because He, born of her, “opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers;” she was “the all-undefiled Mother of holiness;” because “the Holy One born of her was called the Son of God;” she was “the light-clad Mother of Light,” because He Who indwelt her and was born of her, “was the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”’

¹⁶ paraphrased, from Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, c. 100, ANF, vol. 1, p. 249, also Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.22.34

¹⁷ Mascall, ‘The Dogmatic Theology of the Mother of God’, p. 43.

¹⁸ Mascall, *Ibid.* 43. p 42: ‘It is because Christ is still a man that our manhood is renewed by our baptismal incorporation in him’, and it because he is still a man that the Holy Communion continues his saving and transforming work. ‘And it is because Christ is still man that the relation of mother to son which began when Mary conceived him in her womb still continues and will continue to all eternity. Because he is still a man, she is still his mother.’

¹⁹ One of the windows of St Thomas Church, Oxford, gives this a visual form. In one of the windows of the north aisle where mid-week Masses are celebrated, the heavenly Jerusalem is pictured as a woman who bears in her womb the Holy City the new Jerusalem. This woman evokes icons and images of the BVM where Christ is shown in her womb, but in this case, instead of the child, we see the holy city which will come down from heaven, the home and communion of all the saints who will one day belong to Christ. This heavenly city is in certain way inter-changeable with the icon of the unborn Christ in the virgin’s womb.

²⁰ Mascall, ‘The Mother of God’, in *Mary’s Place*, p. 96.

be the Church.²¹ She is described later in chapter 12 as the mother of many children who are persecuted by the worldly powers which oppose God.

In Mary, the Mother of God, we see not just the past, but the future. The hope of the Dormition and assumption, is a hope which is ours whether or not we celebrate what we believe has happened already, or what we believe will happen at the end of all things.

Metropolitan Kallistos describes ‘the Assumption essentially as an eschatological event, [an event of the end of history] as an anticipation of that full theosis of the human person which will be the lot of all the blessed at the resurrection from the dead on the last day’.²² The mystery which we celebrate is the mystery of our future, of our hidden life in Christ, of our sharing the divine life which is his.²³ Mary’s resurrection and assumption, ‘are essentially anticipations of what is prepared for the humanity of the whole Christ in the risen life; both were bestowed in advance upon the Mother of God’.²⁴

The Russian theologian Sergei Bulgakov describes this beautifully:

The Mother of God in her resurrected and glorified body is already the completed glory of the world and its resurrection. With the resurrection and ascension of the Mother of God the world is completed in its creation, *the goal of the world is attained*, ‘wisdom is justified in her children,’ for the Mother of God is already that glorified world which is divinized and open for the reception of Divinity.²⁵

Again, whether or not you are moved to see this as something which has already been accomplished, we can all see it as a description of the working out of our salvation as members of the one body of Christ. Bulgakov continues:

Mary is the heart of the world and the spiritual focus of all humanity, of every creature. She is already the perfectly and absolutely divinized creature, the one who begets God, who bears God and receives God.²⁶

Bulgakov’s description of Mary and her Son is represented at the top of the East Window of this chapel.²⁷ At the top of the window:

‘Mary and her Son are seated side by side, turned towards each other. Both are enthroned, both are crowned. But while [our Lord] Jesus wears his crown in his own right, Mary is receiving hers from the hands of an Angel. And while Mary’s head is inclined in adoration and her hands are joined in supplication, the head of

²¹ Mascall, in ‘The Mother of God’, refers to Edwyn Hoskyns on this dual symbolism, in his 1920 article, ‘GENESIS I—III AND ST JOHNS GOSPEL’ in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 83, Apr., 1920, p. 210-18, p. 212. Also, *Revelation: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XII*, illustrates this double reference.

²² Ware, p. 93.

²³ See also Karl Rahner on this, ‘The interpretation of the dogma of the Assumption’, *Theological Investigations*, Vol 1, esp. pp 224-7.

²⁴ Quoting Bulgakov’s *The Orthodox Church*, in Ware, p. 93.

²⁵ Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, tran. & ed. by Thomas Allan Smith, EERDMANS, 2009, p. 74

²⁶ Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, p. 75.

²⁷ Bulgakov, p. 75-6: ‘She, a human and a creature, sits in the heavens with her Son, who is seated at the right hand of the Father. She is the Queen of Heaven and Earth, or, more briefly, the Heavenly Queen ... The Lord has the glory which He receives from the Father; this is His proper glory, the glory belonging to Him from all ages, radiating in His most pure flesh, the glory of Transfiguration ... On the contrary, in her glorification the Mother of God receives through the Son from the Father the glory and power which are not inherently hers according to human nature.’

Jesus is erect in authority [in his left hand holding an orb with a cross, representing his dominion as Saviour of the World] and his right hand is lifted in blessing'.²⁸

I'm going to conclude with more Bulgakov, and his attempts to probe the mysteries of this festival. He makes it clear how the celebration of the divine life in Mary is a celebration of the hope that God will share the divine life in us also. He emphasizes why it is important to have an image of the BVM alongside the image of her Son.

'The Divine image in humankind is disclosed and realized in the heavens as the image of two: of Christ and of His Mother... Christ is the New Adam, having been incarnated and made human. ... And yet in the heavens there is still one human image which obviously also pertains to the fullness of the human prototype, namely, the Mother of God, "the second Eve ... the second Eve is a creature, a human being belonging to the creaturely world. In this sense she originates from the Second Adam, i.e., from God, although she gives Him human flesh."²⁹

...

'The Divine image in humankind is disclosed and realized in the heavens as the image of two'. The image of the Divine-human Son displays God taking on human nature and human life. The image of the Mother of God shows a human life which has been transformed by the indwelling of divine grace. In the words of St Augustine with comments from the Pope Emeritus: "Before conceiving the Lord in her body she had already conceived him in her soul". She had made room for the Lord in her soul [first] and thus really became the true Temple where God made himself incarnate, where he became present on this earth.³⁰ Returning to Bulgakov again:

The Holy Spirit is revealed to creation only through action, His gifts. ... A personal incarnation, a 'being made-man' [of God the Holy Spirit] does not exist. Still, if there is no personal incarnation of the [Holy Spirit] ... in the same sense in which the Son of God became human... there can all the same be such a human, a creature [who receives the Spirit who is] ... the vessel of the fulfilment of the Holy Spirit. [This vessel becomes] transparent for the Holy Spirit, by bearing witness about itself: *behold the handmaid of the Lord*. Such a being, the Most Holy Virgin, is not a personal incarnation of the Holy Spirit, but she becomes His personal, animate receptacle, an absolutely spirit-born creature, the Pneumatophoric Human.³¹

We celebrate today Mary the Mother of God, and we celebrate the divine life in her. In celebrating the divine life in her, we celebrate what is ours also, and what we hope will be worked out in us.

The spotless Bride, the Mother of Him in Whom the Father was well pleased, she who was preordained by God to be the dwelling place of His union of two natures without confusion today delivers her blameless soul to her Creator and her God. The spiritual powers receive her with the honors due to God, and she who is truly the Mother of Life departs to life, the lamp of the unapproachable Light// the salvation of the faithful and hope of our souls.

²⁸ This is Mascall's description, adapted, 'The Dogmatic Theology of the Mother of God', p. 37.

²⁹ Bulgakov, *Burning Bush* p. 80. See the final footnote for the complete passage.

³⁰ Mass on The Solemnity of The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Parish Church of St Thomas of Villanova, Castel Gandolfo, Tuesday, 15 August 2006

³¹ Ibid. p. 81. See the final footnote for the complete passage.

She is the hope of our souls, because what we celebrate in her, we hope to be accomplished in us. Heaven has come down, and we are raised up to heaven.³²

³² Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, p. 80-82:

‘In the glory of the Mother of God the glory of creation has been revealed. The Mother of God is the personal manifestation of Divine Wisdom, Sophia, which in *another* sense is Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. In this way there are two personal images of Sophia: the creaturely and the divine humanly, and two human images in the heavens: the Godman and the Mother of God. This must be understood in connection with the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity, of God and the world. The Divine image in humankind is disclosed and realized in the heavens as the image of two: of Christ and of His Mother. The Son of God contains in himself the whole fullness of Divinity proper to the whole Most Holy Trinity, one in essence and undivided. And as the New Adam, having been incarnated and made human, the Son of God is the pre-eternal Human, who imaged himself in Adam. Only on the basis of this ontological affinity with the image and prototype are the incarnation and the hominization of the Second Hypostasis possible. The human image as the Divine image and the Divine image as the human image are glorified in both the first and second Adam. And yet in the heavens there is still one human image which obviously also pertains to the fullness of the human prototype, namely, the Mother of God, "the second Eve." The first Eve had been created out of the rib of the first Adam. Her origin proved possible only in connection with him, as his necessary disclosure and complement; the Divine image in humankind was realized in fullness only in the two of them (Gen 1.27, "And God created humankind after His image, after the Divine image he created him, man and woman he created them"). Both the first Adam and the first Eve are wholly the creation of God although a hierarchy of genesis is established between them: "Adam is of God," Eve is from Adam. The Second Adam is very Lord, who assumed [p. 81] flesh, i.e., His own creature; the second Eve is a creature, a human being belonging to the creaturely world. In this sense she originates from the Second Adam, i.e., from God, although she gives Him human flesh. The Holy Spirit is revealed to creation only through action, His gifts. His depiction is clearly symbolic, and does not disclose His Hypostasis: "in the guise of a dove" or "in the vision of fiery tongues," or in the form of one of the angels in the appearance to Abraham, though it is not known which one. A personal incarnation, a hominization of the Third Hypostasis, does not exist. Still, if there is no personal incarnation of the Third Hypostasis, no hominization in the same sense in which the Son of God became human, there can all the same be such a human, creaturely hypostasis, such a being which is the vessel of the fulfilment of the Holy Spirit. It completely surrenders its human hypostatic life, makes it transparent for the Holy Spirit, by bearing witness about itself: *behold the handmaid of the Lord*. Such a being, the Most Holy Virgin, is not a personal incarnation of the Holy Spirit, but she becomes His personal, animate receptacle, an absolutely spirit-born creature, the Pneumatophoric Human.

...

[p. 82] *The Icon of the Mother of God with Child*, the Logos and the creature receiving Him, filled with the Holy Spirit, in unity and its indivisibility, is *the full image* of humankind. The Godman and the Pneumatophore, the Son and the Mother, displaying the revelation of the Father through the Second and Third Hypostases, also display the fullness of the Divine image in humankind or, to put it another way, of the human image in God.