

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible to Luke 1. Place a statue or icon of Mary near the bible. Honor Mary with flowers or a lighted votive.

LEADER: Holy Mary, full of grace

ALL: Help us trust God's word.

LEADER: Holy Mary, Mother of God.

ALL: Let us give birth to the urgings of Spirit within us in acts of mercy and justice.

LEADER: Holy Mary, blessed are you among women.

ALL: We believe with you in your Son.

This Sunday the Catholic Church celebrates the assumption of Mary, Jesus' mother, into heavenly glory. The dogma of the assumption, like that of Mary's conception without sin, flows from her role as the Mother of God.

Mary is not only Jesus' mother but the first believer in her Son. She trusts the word the angel brings to her—that she will bear the Son of the Most High. Her kinswoman Elizabeth in the gospel for this feast praises Mary for believing that God will fulfill this word.

The dogmas that describe the beginning and ending of Mary's life derive from her motherhood and faith. To be the mother of God, God fills her with grace and keeps her free from sin—her immaculate conception. As the mother of God and model believer, Mary shares Jesus' victory over death—her assumption. Her son conquers sin and death; Mary shares in his victory. Elizabeth Johnson observes, "The Immaculate Conception is not so much about the absence of sin as

about the presence of grace and about Mary's vocation in salvation history. This dogma testifies, 'God's grace is more original than sin'" (*Dangerous Memories* 35).

In 1950, Pope Pius XII defined Mary's assumption into heaven as a dogma. This status affirms that Mary's assumption is an integral part of Christian faith, a mystery long believed and celebrated in the Church.

The Eastern Church especially celebrates Mary's dormition or falling asleep; in fact, in the 5th century the feast of Mary's dormition was celebrated on August 15 throughout the entire Byzantine Empire. Icons picture Mary lying asleep on a bed with Jesus standing beside her, holding her like a baby in his arms. The icon reverses their relationship with Jesus caring for his mother as Mary cared for her son.

In celebrating Mary's bodily assumption into heaven, this feast celebrates the faith we express every time we proclaim the Creed, "We look for the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come." We believe that we will one day share eternal life bodily, not just as spirits or souls.

Human existence is bodily existence. The risen Jesus who ascended into heaven is truly human and truly divine; he continues his human, embodied existence in glory. He is the firstborn of a new humanity. The dogma of the assumption proclaims that Mary as a whole human person, body and spirit, lives with God in glory, one like us who will be waiting to share eternal life with us.

● Of what importance to you is Mary as a model of faith?

● How does her assumption affirm the holiness of the human body?



GOSPEL

Mary is blessed among women.

NARRATOR: In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry—

ELIZABETH: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? The moment I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who trusted that God's words to her would be fulfilled.

MARY: My being magnifies the greatness of God. My spirit finds joy in God, my Savior. For God has looked upon me in my lowliness, on me, God's servant. Now all ages shall call me blessed.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is God's name. Great is God's mercy toward all who fear the Holy One in every generation.

Strong is God's arm, for God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

God has come to the help of Israel, God's servant, and remembered the mercy promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants forever.

NARRATOR: Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.

Luke 1.39-56

Mary was a young teen when Herod the Great died and peasants in Galilee revolted and attacked the city of Sephoris, a tax collection center, four miles from Nazareth. Roman soldiers put down the attack and rampaged through the villages of Galilee doing violence. Mary lived through headlines like ours today.

Mary's God is stronger than empire. God's arm scatters the proud and brings down the powerful from their thrones. God's arm fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. Her song announces God's intent to transform history for the poor.

In fact, Mary's song proclaims that what God has done for her fulfills promises made to Abraham and Sarah, Israel's earliest ancestors in faith. What God does in lifting up Mary is what her prayer praises God for doing throughout Israel's history.

Mary's story parallels the story of Israel. God heard the outcry of the people enslaved in Egypt and sent Moses to set them free. Mary's Magnificat testifies that God extends mercy from age to age and keeps faith with the poor and hungry.

Among Christians Mary has many faces, all of them faces of hope. As the Immaculate Conception, Mary wears the blue robe of France's monarchy. This image of Mary comes out of Europe in the 19th century as the Church lost lands and secular status. Mary reigns as an ideal Christian queen and intercessor with her Son.

● What is your favorite icon or image of Mary?

● What does Mary represent to you?

Mary gives hope a human face.

Artists find having Mary, or Jesus in his ascension, rise through glorious clouds quite irresistible. But now that planes, space stations, and giant telescopes have tamed the skies, we envision heaven not so much in the clouds but as communion in God, a lasting relationship. At death we step into mystery, into faith and promise.

The gospel's have no account of Mary's assumption. On this feast we remember Mary's visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth, two pregnant and prophetic women who trust God's promises. The Spirit fills

Elizabeth with an ecstatic testimony that Mary is three times blessed: blessed are you among women, blessed is the child in your womb, and blessed is she who trusts God's words will be fulfilled. We reflect on Mary's prayer magnifying God's greatness, a song of justice and liberation.

God has looked on her in her lowliness, Mary says in her song. She comes from among the poor where families lived in houses with dirt floors and cooked outside. She lived under triple taxes—to the Roman Empire, to Herod the local king, and to the temple.



Polish Catholics honor Our Lady of Czestochowa

In culture after culture peoples clothe Mary as one of their own. The image of Mary that appears on Juan Diego's *tilde* shows Mary wearing the starry robe of the Aztec goddess, standing on the moon, a black bow of pregnancy at her waist, her face brown like the earth and the indigenous people.

Mary appears to Juan Diego in central Mexico in 1531, only 40 years after Columbus arrives and

the Spanish conquer the Aztec nation. She promises to hear the prayers of this indigenous people, utterly defeated by war and smallpox, to open a future for those who have none.

Our Mexican brothers and sisters see the human face of God in Our Lady of Guadalupe. Her promise to Juan Diego to hear the prayers of his people is an empowering promise to lift up the lowly.

Mary is not only an individual woman who trusts all the Spirit conceives in her and then gives birth to Jesus, but also a woman who represents her people. She comes from among their poor. Israel's religious traditions nourish her openness to God's dwelling in her. Like the whole people, Mary is God's dwelling place. She bears God into the world in giving birth to Jesus. Mary gathers with the first believers on Pentecost when the Spirit sets their tongues afire with the good news in every language and gives birth to the Church.

Mary actively joins in Jesus' jubilee movement of bringing a

year of God's healing, forgiving favor among the people. In John's gospel she helps Jesus inaugurate his ministry and begin his new community at the Cana wedding feast. She tells others to do what he says. Near the end of John's gospel Mary stands with Jesus at the cross.

Mary visits Jesus during the early days of his ministry to question what he's doing. She is actively involved. Jesus includes Mary in his expanding family of believers. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sisters and mother" (Mark 3.35).

● What does Mary show us about who we Christians are?

● How can we embody God's Spirit in the world?



A woman brings God's victory to birth.

The Church reads from the book of Revelation only on the Feast of Christ the King and the Sundays of Easter in Cycle B and on the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls. We contemporary Christians don't get much practice in decoding the elaborate images and symbol system this book puts together to reflect on God's triumph over evil in Jesus Christ.

Revelation reflects the tensions between Christians and the Roman Empire. Apocalyptic writing is a literary form somewhat like science fiction. It creates elaborate worlds in which people struggle through persecutions, famines, plagues.



Our Lady of Guadalupe



This kind of writing arises as the foreign armies that occupy Israel drive the people's own religion and worship underground. The section of Revelation we read to celebrate Mary's assumption anticipates the happy ending of the story, God's victory over the evil empire and salvation for God's faithful ones.

Halfway through Revelation, its writer, John, introduces a triumphant woman shining with the sun, reigning over the moon and stars. The woman represents Israel, the people from whom the messiah was born. She represents the Christian community, whom the evil dragon persecutes. The dragon is an ancient symbol of chaos in Mesopotamian cultures. John describes the woman in

ultimate victory, her child snatched from the jaws of the dragon and herself safe in a place God prepares for her.

The liturgy sees in this woman the figure of Mary, the one among the people of Israel who gave birth to the messiah. Mary also represents the Church, who gives birth in baptism to followers of the messiah.

God's victory over evil

God's temple in heaven opened and in the temple could be seen the ark of the covenant. A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Because she was with child, she wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth.

Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge dragon, flaming red, with seven heads and ten horns; and seven diadems on each head. Its tail swept a third of the stars from the sky and hurled them down to the earth.

Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, ready to devour her child when it should be born. She gave birth to a son—a boy who is destined to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was snatched up to God and to God's throne. The woman herself fled into the desert where a special place had been prepared for her by God.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say, "Now have salvation and power come, the reign of our God and the authority of his Anointed One."

Revelation 11.19, 12.1-6,10

● When you imagine the Church of Christ triumphing over evil, what evil do you think of and in what does the triumph consist?

PRAY

To conclude your reflection on Mary and the scriptures for her feast day, pray her Magnificat together and then sing the hymn below, which comes from Vespers for this feast.

LEADER: Holy Mary, you have been taken up into heaven!

ALL: In Christ all will come to life again.

Sing to the tune of *Amazing Grace*.

*O Mary, death was not for you;
You passed through death to life,
to be enthroned as heaven's queen,
to be our guide in life.*

*In presence of this glorious sight,
all nature lifts its face,
on seeing you assumed on high
to share in God's own grace.*

*O Jesus, glory be to you,
the Virgin's only son.
All praise to God the Father be
and Spirit, three in one.*



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