

THE BACKGROUND OF THE DEFINITION

BY

COLUMBA CARY-ELWES, O.S.B.



OME have maintained that it was the apocryphal stories current towards the middle and end of the fourth century which created the idea that our Lady went up to heaven body and soul after death. This was the not the order in the case of the Gospels and the apocryphal gospels; the former came first and then they were embroidered. So it would have been with the *De Dormitione Beatae Mariae*. It would have rested upon some foundation in the now forgotten tradition of the earliest times about the dormition of Mary. But it is not on these stories that the belief in the Assumption of Mary is grounded. Indeed, Pope Gelasius, while having a feast in his sacramentary for the Assumption, went out of his way to condemn those apocrypha as not being part of the canon of Scripture. It is an interesting point to note that, while denying their authenticity, he does not condemn the underlying truth.

The belief in the Assumption rests neither on explicit Scripture proof nor on explicit traditional proof, but it lay implicit in certain truths believed in by the early Church. From the very earliest times Mary has been most intimately linked, as is only natural, with the work of her divine Son. The way that St Irenaeus, St Justin and Tertullian put it, and put it more than once, was that, just as Christ is the new Adam, so Mary is the new Eve. They apply to Jesus and Mary the text of Genesis 3, in which the woman and her son shall crush the head of the serpent. That is unanimously taken to represent the triple triumph and victory of Christ over Satan. If Mary is linked with and shares in part of this victory, she shares in the whole.

Now it is explicit in the early Church that she shared in her divine Son's victory over sin by being immaculate; likewise and even more clearly she shares his victory over concupiscence (and that is the result of sin) by being 'ever virgin'. So does she share, we now see, in his victory over the corruption and division of death, yet another result of the fall of the first Adam and the first Eve.

That idea seems to have lain dormant in the minds of the early Fathers. It is St Epiphanius (c. 310-400) who is the first, that we know of—there may have been many more whose recorded witness has perished—who certainly believed that Mary was assumed into heaven. The only doubt in his mind seems to be whether she really

died at the end. His implied reason for the Assumption appears to be: how could the Mother of Life undergo death?

The root idea is that Mary is the Mother of God, the God-man who came to save us. This puts her in so close a proximity to her divine Son and his work that, as is implied in Genesis, she shared in all his work and in his glory. She accepted the Incarnation, she stood at the foot of the Cross, she would surely share in the resurrection before her body had time to corrupt—that body from whom the body of the Saviour was fashioned.

The words of Saint Epiphanius, being the first from the writings of the great Fathers to refer to the subject deserve to be quoted:

'But if any think I am in error, let them search the traces of Mary in the Scriptures, and they will find there no mention of her death, neither whether she died or whether she did not die, nor whether she was buried or was not buried. And then with regard to the journey of St John when he set out for Asia (Minor), nowhere do we read that he took the holy Virgin with him. For here Scripture is simply silent, in order not to lead away the mind to astonishment by matters of exceeding marvel. For my own part I do not dare to speak, but, while I have my own thoughts, observe a like silence. Still, though we are unable to certify her death, we may perchance find some traces of that holy and blessed one that bear upon it. For there is, on the one hand, what Simeon says to her, "Thine own soul also shall a sword pierce, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed"; and, on the other hand, St John tells in the Apocalypse, that the dragon hastened against the woman, who had brought forth the man child, and there were given to her wings of an eagle and she was taken into the desert that the dragon might not seize on her. (Apoc. xii.) This then may have been well fulfilled in Mary. However, I do not decide, nor say that she remained immortal (that is, without dying); nor either will I vouch that she died. For Holy Scripture, overpassing the human mind, has left the matter in suspense, for the sake of that precious and most sublime Vessel, that no one should have thought concerning her of things pertaining to the flesh. Whether then she died at all we know not. And even though she were buried, yet was her virginity stainless. But who would be so mad as to be willing to give vent to any such blasphemous and unworthy thought, to open his mouth, give licence to his tongue, and utter with his lips what comes of evil mind? Who is there that would prefer, instead of hymning and glorifying her, to entertain any thoughts insulting and injurious to the holy Virgin, and not rather honour that Vessel of all the most honoured?'¹

At about the time that St Epiphanius was writing, namely, the

¹ P.G. 12,716. quoted by Livius in *The Blessed Virgin in the Fathers of the First Six Centuries*, to which this article is greatly indebted.

mid-fourth century, apocryphal writings were appearing which were probably known to him, giving a description of the death and Assumption of Mary with all kinds of fanciful details. We shall not let these detain us except to comment that, as in the case of the apocryphal gospels, these presuppose a tradition of fact which they embroider. But the evidence escapes us. It seems however likely that the appearance of such accounts tended rather to make the great Fathers fight shy of committing themselves, and may account for the caution of the Doctors of the Church, such as St Ambrose and St Augustine, who however never deny the doctrine, though they assert that Mary died.

Meanwhile a feast of the Assumption of Mary, variously called, had appeared. We can date it to the extent of affirming that it existed before the condemnation of Nestorius (A.D. 431), because the Nestorian Christians also celebrated it.

In the West this feast had a very vague significance—for a reason to be given later—but in the East there can be no doubt, from examining the prayers of the liturgy, that by the Assumption the Church meant the bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven. The feast seems to have begun at the founding of a church in Jerusalem by a Roman lady named Ikelia in the middle of the fifth century as the feast of the dedication of that Church. The church's title was *Kathisma*. The feast was extended to the whole Byzantine empire by the emperor Maurice (somewhere between 588 and 602), perhaps on the occasion of the building of a church at Gethsemani over the empty tomb of the Virgin Mary.

Take for instance this cry of the liturgy;

Life germinated from thee without harming the seals of thy virginity; how then could thy pure and Life-giving body suffer the trial of death?

Being the sanctuary of the Life, thou didst obtain eternal life, for, by death, thou wert raised but to life, thou who didst engender Life in Person.²

But in the West, although there is an ancient sarcophagus still extant in a church in Zaragoza, which dates back to the Roman occupation in the early fourth century, and which shows our Lady caught by the wrist from on high, surrounded by the apostles, somewhat as the apocryphal descriptions describe the scene, yet the development of the doctrine seems to have been brought to a halt by two events. The first was the publication of a document by the pseudo-Jerome—St Jerome's authority in Scripture and in Palestinian things was unequalled in the West—and the second the condemnation of the apocryphal stories by Pope Gelasius.

² *La Prière des Eglises de rite byzantin*. By R. P. F. Marcenier. vol. 2. p. 303.

The operative words in the pseudo-Jerome are as follows:

'How, at what time, or by whom, her (Mary's) body was thence taken away, nor whither transferred, or whether she rose again, is unknown; although some would affirm that she is already raised again to life, and clothed with Christ in unchangeable bliss. . . .

Our blessed course however is to commit the whole matter to God, to whom nothing is impossible, rather than to wish to settle anything rashly by *our own* authority. . . .' (P.L. 30, 122.)

and later in the same letter:

'That this happened in the case of Blessed Mary—for nothing is impossible with God—we do not deny; though for caution's sake, and not to do any prejudice to faith, we should rather hold as an opinion with pious desire, than unadvisedly define what we may be ignorant about without peril.'

This letter became the nocturn lessons for the feast of the Assumption in the Sarum breviary. And it will readily be understood how the authority of St Jerome, by this letter falsely attributed to him, restrained theologians from advancing along the line traced out in the West by St Gregory of Tours and in the East, particularly, by St John Damascene.

We may sum up then the early history of the doctrine of the Assumption as follows:

1. There is no positive evidence in the first century as to the death or burial or assumption of the Blessed Mary, not even the place nor indeed the date. There is this curious piece of negative evidence, that no one ever claimed to have her holy remains, while for all the other human beings closely associated with the story of our Lord's life, their bodies have remained to this day or at least antiquity claimed to possess them.

2. In the second century, too, there is no direct evidence concerning the Assumption of Mary. On the other hand there is ever-growing evidence that the early Church had immense reverence for her and associated her most intimately with Christ in his saving life and death. According to St Irenaeus, Christ is the second Adam and Mary the second Eve. The same is true for the witness of St Justin and for Tertullian. And we may presume from this that it was an apostolic way of speaking of Mary, for these three come from the West, the East, and Africa.

3. It must be presumed that a widespread belief in the Assumption was already prevalent in the third century because of the widespread stories of the fact in the early part of the following century.

4. The span of years 300-400 provides us with the first clear documentary, explicit witness to a belief in the Assumption. There

is the sarcophagus of Zaragoza, the widespread apocryphal writings describing in a legendary manner the Assumption of Mary, there is that dawn of illumination in the writings of St Epiphanius.

5. In the fifth century, the feast is already widespread; witness it in the Nestorian Church. In mid-century the tomb was discovered in Jerusalem. The pseudo-Dionysius makes reference to the doctrine.

6. In about the year 600 A.D. the feast was extended to the whole Byzantine empire by the emperor Maurice. A few years before, St Gregory of Tours (died 593) gave the doctrine the authority of his name.

7. The weight of the authority of St John Damascene in the eighth century did not create the doctrine; it did establish it on a sure foundation.

8. After this period the doctrine of the Assumption one might say marks time until the period of the Reformation, one which belittled the part of Mary; and, ever since, the doctrinal progress in Mariology has been immense, beginning with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, her first victory over Satan, and now followed by the Assumption, the last. It is not the last dogma that will be defined concerning Mary, one may feel fairly confident.

It is important to realise that, from our own Catholic point of view, there is no need to *go back* to the Early Church in order to prove that the dogma of the Assumption could or should be defined. In this connection there has been preserved a very interesting list of instructions or pointers laid down by Pope Pius IX for the theologians examining the definability of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. They are as follows, and they apply equally well to the situation today on the definition of the Assumption:

For the Church to judge that it is safe and right for her to proceed to the definition of some truth, *she does not consider it necessary*

(a) that there should not have been in the past different opinions in the Catholic Church, nor that there should always have been unanimous agreement on the point to be defined;

(b) that writers of weighty authority who held the contrary opinion could not be brought forward;

(c) that there should be explicit or at least implicit evidence in sacred Scripture; for it is certain and manifest that the scope (*cyclum*) of revelation is wider than the sacred Scriptures;

(d) that the thing to be defined should belong to tradition through such a series of Fathers and witnesses, that it could be shown to go right back to apostolic times.

He goes on: Such false ideas rest on the following false conjectures:

(a) that all the doctrines put forward were written down by the Fathers.

(b) that all the monuments of antiquity have come down to us;
 (c) that the whole object of faith was always distinctly conceived and formally expressed;

(d) that later tradition could disagree with earlier tradition;

(e) that one could not legitimately conclude from the doctrine of a later age at least an implicit teaching in an earlier one.

Therefore, he proceeds: the following notes are proposed as being sufficient for the definability of a doctrine:

(a) a certain number of weighty testimonies touching the controverted point;

(b) the display of one or several revealed principles containing the proposition to be defined;

(c) a necessary 'dogmatic connection' such as, if the proposition in question were denied then it would necessarily and immediately follow that one or several articles of faith were false;

(d) the unanimous teaching of the episcopate of the present time;

(e) the practice (*praxis*) of the Church.³

Applying these principles to 1950 and to the doctrine of the Assumption, it would seem that the doctrine is definable without any doubt, because it is already the common teaching of the whole Church at the present time. This is evident from the almost unanimity of the episcopate which, dispersed, has yet petitioned for the definition to be made. Doubtless had times been tranquil the Vatican council would have continued its sitting and the assembled bishops would have acclaimed the doctrine in conclave. Already before the fathers of the Council broke up in 1870 over two hundred had petitioned that the doctrine be defined.

In the second place, the very fact that throughout the Church there is a great feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 15th August is a proof that the whole Church believes the truth of the fact as part of the Christian belief. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* is exemplified in this practice.

The right method of approaching the appreciation of a dogma of the Church is to go to the fullest exposition of it; for the Church is just as infallible today as it was in the first century. By the light of our present greater insight we can best interpret the statements of the early Fathers and of Holy Scripture in regard to it.

The present teaching (one does not claim to know how the position will be put in the Papal document to come on 1st November) is based upon the nature of Mary's share in the redemptive acts of her divine Son. In cold syllogistic language it runs thus:

The victory of Christ our Redeemer, foretold in Genesis 3, 14-15.

³ These notes may be found in P. Carolus Balic's *Pro Veritate Assumptionis B. V. Mariae Dogmaticae Definienda*, Rome 1949, p. 49.

is also the victory of the Mother of the Saviour. (See the fact in tradition from Irenaeus onwards.) She is the new Eve, who is most intimately associated with the perfect victory of Christ over sin and Satan.

Now the perfect victory of Christ over the devil contains, as one of its parts, perfect victory over sin, concupiscence, and over death, the last shown forth by his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Therefore the Blessed Virgin Mary, *arctissime sociata plenae victoriae* (most intimately linked with the full victory of Christ) over sin through the immaculate conception, over concupiscence through her virginal maternity, was also associated with the victory of the Redeemer over the enemy, death, by a glorious resurrection.⁴

It is also argued that that most perfect body of the one who bore Christ's body should neither suffer corruption nor isolation from its soul. There was besides no reason in her nature, being immaculate, why her body should wait before being reunited to her soul. But it is chiefly by the parallelism between Eve and Mary and their contrasting action, that the position of Mary in the divine scheme is made clear.

⁴ This is the argument in P. Carolus Balfe's book, p. 34, referred to above.