

## FIFTH STAGE

# MARY'S ASSUMPTION — THE VIRGIN, ESCHATOLOGICAL IMAGE OF THE CHURCH

### The Assumption

How did Mary's life end? History has left no trace of an answer.

It is by other ways, not historical but dogmatic,<sup>1</sup> that Pius XII made this end of her life, or rather this completion of her life, the object of a dogma. The definition of faith is reduced to these concise terms:

"The immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever Virgin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken body and soul into the glory of heaven."<sup>2</sup>

1. 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. This statement is a conclusion firmly established by the considerable works undertaken between 1944 and 1950. The ignorance professed at the end of the fourth century by St. Epiphanius, one of the best informed witnesses in his day, is a most significant indication in this matter (cf. *supra*, p. 67).

2. Constitution *Munificentissimus* November 1, 1950, AAS 42 (1950), p. 770, Denz. 2333 (3903).

Pius XII formally defined *Mary's presence now* with the risen Christ, in the communion of glory. He defined nothing more.

Where? When? How? The definition purposely avoids answering any of these questions. It does not even specify whether Mary died, as is ordinarily said, or whether she did not. The question raised by Epiphanius in 377 remains unanswered. Pius XII judged that this probable fact is not found with certainty in revelation. The reasons for this reserve will be treated in Appendix #12.<sup>3</sup>

The definition despoiled the apocryphals and Marian iconography of their imagery. It gave no heed to either myth or anecdote.

What is important and yet unrecognized is that it intentionally avoided suggesting "up there" and "down here," as well as any image of a transfer. It is inexactly and out of sheer accommodation to accustomed style that translations ordinarily say that Mary was "*raised up*" to heaven. This verb introduces a special imagery that was intentionally avoided. "*Assumpta*" means "to assume," or in other words, "to take." To the verb "*sumere*" the prefix "*ad-*" adds the notion of adjoining, aggregating, reuniting. "*Assumere*" is therefore the biblical equivalent of the Hebrew verb *LKH* (to take) which the Bible uses to signify the mysterious end of Enoch (Gen. 5:24; Sirach 44:16 and 49:16) and that of Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:3, 5, 9, 10; Sirach 48:9): God "took" them to himself. And it is on the basis of this word that the psalmists discovered the mystery of retribution in the afterlife for all the just that God "will take" at the end of their destiny (Ps. 49:16; 73:24). "You will take me into glory," says the psalmist. This is exactly the expression that Pius XII used, but he specified, "body and soul." It is integrally and not just in soul that the "immaculate Mother of God" rejoins the risen Christ.

The definition does not even specify whether there is ques-

3. Cf. *infra*, Appendix #12.

tion here of a unique privilege. It thus left the way open to an opinion according to which immediate bodily glorification would be the common lot of all. This new opinion has no other weight than that of the few arguments proposed in its favor, and it meets with counter arguments and objections.<sup>4</sup> The birth of this theory on the morrow of the definition of the Assumption, as also the expansion of the immortalist theory, attest to the reserve and extreme restraint of the dogmatic formula whose boldness has rather more often been underlined.

The only exception to the terseness that characterizes this definition is the manner in which Mary is designated: "the immaculate Mother of God," "Mary ever Virgin." These titles were not added out of a simple motive of piety or generosity characteristic of Italian style. They have dogmatic value here. The body of the immaculate one, preserved from all sin, the body of the Theotokos who engendered the Word of God, this body whose virginity the Holy Spirit integrally preserved, even in conception and childbirth, did not remain prisoner of the bonds of death.<sup>5</sup> In the totality of her being, the immaculate Mother of God, ever a Virgin, rejoined Christ in the communion of glory.

There remains the task of seizing the scope of this last transition.

4. K. Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1961. Among the foundations on which Rahner builds his argument is the case of the resurrected persons of Mt. 27:52, and the principle that Christ's entry into eternal glory does not open up an empty space but rather establishes a corporal community of the redeemed. In this hypothesis, the Assumption is no longer either an anticipation or a privilege. Schillebeeckx has vigorously taken a position against this thesis, but without discussing the reasons alleged. Cf. also K. Rahner, "The Interpretation of the Dogma of the Assumption," *Theological Investigations*, Baltimore, Helicon, 1961, vol. 1, p. 226.

5. Such are the terms of the prayer *Veneranda*, the most ancient Assumption prayer in the West. It was cited by Pius XII in his Constitution *Munificentissimus*. Cf. M. Jugie, *L'Assomption*, Rome, 1944, p. 263.

## Mary at the End of Pilgrimage

The first thing to note appears almost paradoxical: in entering into glory Mary seems to lose something. By leaving her earthly and wayfaring condition, she loses the ability of meriting. But privation here is only apparent. If the Mother of God loses this ability, it is because her merits were at their height and her destiny had been reached.

What remains to be said beyond this first consideration is manifestly positive.

### "With the Lord Forever" (1 Thes. 4:17)

First she finds her Son once again after a long separation, that of the public life and the time following his death on the cross. Henceforward their union is *definitive*. It is *without shadow*. Mary knows her Son no longer by dint of earthly signs, in a way obscure and limited, but face-to-face with his divinity. Earlier she knew him as God through his humanity. Now she knows his humanity through his very divinity.

### Maternal Knowledge

In this last stage Mary's spiritual motherhood attains its consummation. Even before the Annunciation the Blessed Virgin, as has been said, had the soul of a mother with regard to mankind. Her grace of motherhood received new foundations at the Incarnation, and later on Calvary, in a way parallel to and dependent on Christ's grace of headship. While Christ, by taking on flesh, became fundamentally the head of the human race, Mary became *fundamentally* its mother. While formally he became its head by meriting Redemption on its behalf, Mary became *formally* its mother by meriting along with him: and Christ had chosen this "hour" to proclaim her maternal mission (Jn. 19:25-27). This motherhood of hers became *effective* at Pentecost, as the era of

grace began. In heaven it became *conscious*. Prior to that Mary was plunged in the obscurity of faith and did not know the power and effect of her intercession. She did not know each sheep of the flock, as Christ did (Jn. 10:12). Now in God she knows each one of her children. She had loved them in her Son, with a love universal but undistinguishing; in the beatific vision she knows them individually and personally, with a motherly knowledge more intimate than that of the other saints.

One last feature reveals the warmth and intimacy of this knowledge: through her body, risen like Christ's, Mary retains a physical connaturality with us and an effective sympathy toward us, of which the other saints, according to common opinion, are presently deprived.

### Maternal Activity

Mary's heavenly motherhood therefore implies a very perfect knowledge of her children, perfect in its principle since it proceeds from the vision of God, and perfect in its completeness because human knowledge finds in her its full resonance. But to be mother is more than simply to know; it involves acting also. In what does Mary's action toward her children consist? This is a difficult and much debated question.

One point is strongly attested to by tradition. The Mother of Jesus exercises a universal intercession, a living intercession that proceeds from her love. A mother does not know her children in the manner of a scientist coldly tabulating phenomena. Hers is a knowledge full of intentions and desires, like that of an artist with regard to his works, with the difference that the works in question here are persons. But Mary's desires with regard to her children are the desires of God himself. It is an absurd anthropomorphism to portray God's justice in opposition to the maternal mercy of Mary. The merciful prayer of the Virgin is efficacious because it is

the very expression of the love of the God of mercy.

Does this mean that her intercessory prayer is useless? Certainly not. God is in need of no human agency, and yet it was his all-gracious design to make the Redemption the work of mankind, so that salvation might be wholly, and at each of its stages, on the heavenly as on the earthly plane, a human work at the same time as it is a divine work. He became man to save mankind; he associated a woman in his saving mission; he entrusted the Church to the hands of mere men, the apostles and their successors, and he was pleased to have them accomplish works "even greater" than his own (Jn. 14:12; cf. 4:38): he causes each man to merit his own salvation, etc. The role accorded the intercession of Mary and the saints manifests the same all-gracious design with regard to men. In this order, Mary surpasses the saints, for in her heart, as in that of her Son, divine love finds a perfect resonance — a resonance that is pure, because Mary is sinless; full, because she is full of grace; warm and sensitive, because she is already glorified entirely, soul *and* body. Finally, Mary is a woman, and that gives her intercession a note that nothing else can replace. As the heart of Christ gives an echo of manliness to divine love, the heart of Mary gives it a feminine and maternal echo. God welcomes hearing from within human freedom this double echo of his own divine intentions. That is why he values so highly the intercession of Christ's holy humanity and of the person of the Virgin Mary who is so closely and harmoniously joined to Christ.

Therefore, like the heavenly prayer of Christ and within this very prayer, Mary's prayer has, by God's free disposition, a true and universal effectiveness. What is the mode of this effectiveness? Without going into the discussions that this question raises,<sup>6</sup> one can offer a few positive guidelines.

6. On the mode of causality which is Mary's in heaven, a statement of the question will be found in G. Roschini, *Mariologia*, 1947, t. 2, part 1, pp.

Mary's love for her children is, as has been seen, full of desires and intentions that reflect, in her woman's heart filled with grace, the very desires of God. To God she repeats what she wishes along with him, somewhat as a woman likes to tell her husband — and as he likes to hear from her — a cherished thought or a secret wish in her heart. To what extent do these desires affect mankind? *By their own virtue*, they affect mankind intentionally, that is to say in thought, but not really, that is to say not in action. For human wishes, however ardent, do not carry within themselves the principle of their own realization. God alone can accomplish the supernatural wishes Mary has for her children. Does it help any to envisage her intercession in terms of an action in two phases? Just as, for example, Bethsabee is portrayed in the Bible as confiding her request to David and then letting him act (1 Kgs. 1), so Mary would be thought first to pray, then to assist as a spectator at the unfolding of divine power in response to her prayer. But this material and earthly way of thinking ignores the spiritual and heavenly communion implied by the beatific vision. Imagination can hardly be trusted here. It has been shown that Mary's intentions cannot be separated from God's; neither should God's activity and that of Mary be separated. Heaven, in fact, is for Mary what it is for all the elect, but in the highest possible degree: it is a perfect communion, a total interiority with God. So between her and him no kind of dialogue with *successive* replies is to be imagined, as if a ball were being tossed back and forth from one to the other. Just as God's intention inspires and penetrates Mary's intercession from within, so God's power is similarly interior to her. The divine power fulfills all that

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408–421, and in E. Druwé, "La médiation universelle," *Maria* 1 (1949), pp. 558–559. The two theses proposed center on physical and on moral causality; but there are many different nuances: the causality may be intentional, or dispositive, or instrumental, etc. Helpful remarks are found in M. J. Nicolas, "Essai de synthèse mariale," *Maria* 1 (1949), pp. 739–740, as also in J. Bur, *Médiation mariale*, Paris, Desclée, 1955.

is lacking in the impotence and sterility of human wishes. In this total and reciprocal intimacy Mary's wishes attain their effect not only intentionally but really, for God's power inspires and penetrates her prayer and makes it possible for her desires — which, like all desires, are inchoative actions taking shape — to attain their end. Further precision of the way this interpenetration of divine and human activity occurs is hard to make; evidently it is an interpenetration quite different from what exists in the sacraments. But it seems fitting that a mother should thus affect her children, not only in intention but really, and it would be difficult to explain otherwise the experience of the "presence of Mary" so frequently attested in the lives of Christians.<sup>7</sup>

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7. On the "presence" of Mary, cf. E. Neubert, "L'Union mystique à la Sainte Vierge," *Vie Spirituelle* 50 (1937), 15–29; Gregorio de Jesus Crucificado, "La acción de María en las almas," *EstM* 11 (1951), pp. 255–278; S. Matellan, *Presencia de María en la experiencia mística*, Madrid, Cocusa, 1962; S. Ragazzini, *Maria vita del anima*, Rome, Desclée, 1960.

The first expressions of this presence are found in the Byzantine homilists: "Just as you dwelt bodily with those of ages past, so you live with us in spirit; the powerful protection with which you cover us is a sign of your presence among us" (St. Germanus of Constantinople, *Sermo 1 in Dormitione* 3, PG 98:344d; cf. *ibid.*, 345a, 345c). "What is there sweeter than the Mother of God? She captivates my mind, she delights my tongue, I picture her to myself day and night" (St. John Damascene, *Sermo 3 in Dormitione* 19, PG 97:752bc).

"Cujus felix memoria sed felicior est praesentia — Sweet is her memory but sweeter her presence" writes an author sometime before the end of the twelfth century, perhaps St. Peter Damian in his *Liber saluatorius*, MS in the Bibliothèque Nationale, new Latin acquisitions # 186, ed. J. Leclercq in *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 72 (1958), 303.

This spiritual phenomenon is frequently met with from St. Bernard's day onward. In the seventeenth century it is found even at Port-Royal in Marie-Claude Arnauld, who calls Mary "the only way by which I am able to hope for God's mercy," immediately adding, "Most of the time I am taken up entirely with her, living only under her shadow" (*Letter to Monsieur Singlin in Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Port-Royal*, Utrecht, 1942, t. 3, p. 471). The ways of expressing this presence vary greatly: "Mary does not leave me. Although she is not visible, I feel her

## “Mediation”<sup>8</sup>

Some astonishment may well be felt that in all this matter no mention has yet been made of “Marian mediation.” The fact is that, if the question had not assumed such importance, there would be little need even at this point to speak explicitly of mediation. For the term has a wealth of meanings in tradition and, often equivocally, expresses divers aspects of Mary’s mission that have already been treated under other names.

Her mediation was, first of all, the very pure intercession of her prayer before the Annunciation, an already maternal intercession, since, more than Deborah, Mary deserved to be called “mother in Israel” (Jg. 5:7). Indeed, the mediation that Israel had exercised since Abraham in favor of a sinful world (Gen. 18: 17–23) attained its highest efficacy in Mary.

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presence and protection” (Marie-Colette du Sacré-Coeur (1857–1907), cited by J. J. Navatel, *Soeur Marie-Colette du Sacré-Coeur, religieuse clarisse du monastère de Besançon*, Paris, Gigord, n.d., p. 208). “I do not see her, but I feel her as the horse feels the hand of the rider who leads him” (Venerable Cestac, cited by Bordarrampé, *Le Vénérable L.-E. Cestac*, Paris, Gigord, 1925, p. 458). Essentially what is meant is not a sensible presence, but a presence of the order of faith and charity, a recognition of the role of Mary in the communion of saints.

This presence must be carefully distinguished from the creative presence of God. God makes us exist, he actuates us according to grace. Without his action we should cease to be. Mary’s presence works nothing as radical as that. It is in the order of her communion of intention and activity with God in heavenly glory.

8. Vatican II was very discreet on the question of mediation. It insisted on the fact that Christ is the “only Mediator” (*Lumen Gentium* art. 60 and 63), and with respect to Mary it limited itself to justifying the application of the title of “mediatrix” to her, and, at that, justifying it briefly and among other titles: “Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Helper, and Mediatrix. These however are to be understood in such a way that they neither take away from nor add anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator” (*Lumen Gentium* art 62). On the question of mediation in the conciliar text, cf. Laurentin, *La Vierge* . . . , pp. 115–129.

Next in time, her mediation was the role she fulfilled at the Incarnation. Her holiness was a bridge between the holy God and sinful humanity. Through her the Word was able to enter unsullied into a sullied race. It was then that Mary was mediatrix in the most meaningful sense of the word, a mediatrix between human corruption and divine transcendence, for the Incarnation of the Son of God.

When the Word became man, he became the “one only Mediator” (1 Tim. 2:5). Thereafter Mary’s mediation assumes quite another meaning. She no longer prepares Christ’s mediation but accompanies it and participates in it from within. And this is so, even when her mediation seems to take on a kind of character all its own, as when she plays the role of bond between Christ and the Church. Undoubtedly during Christ’s lifetime the material conditions of earthly existence give her a role that can in a sense be described as mediatorial: it is she who carries Jesus incarnate within her to her cousin Elizabeth and John the Baptist; it is she who hands him over into Simeon’s arms. She intercedes at Cana to call Christ’s attention to the material fact that the wine has run out. Now, undoubtedly the role that Mary had in all these events still keeps something of the perennial quality proper to the mysteries of Christ’s life. But her mediating intervention at these moments was called for by the factual limitations under which Christ lived as a child or as a man, and in the glory of heaven these limitations are all surpassed. Henceforward she is mediatrix less *with respect to* the Mediator than *in* him and *by* him. All the resources she brings to her mediation are first and entirely a gift of the “one only Mediator.” And not only that, but her whole situation as an intermediary has now given way to a state of total communion of interiority with regard to Christ. The word “mediation,” then, retains only a relative meaning.

In the last analysis, the “universal mediation” of Mary, in the sense prevailing today, is only another name for her universal motherhood with regard to men. And this latter

expression has several advantages over the former. It is more concrete and more biblical (Jn. 19:25–27). It is more formally taught by Vatican II.<sup>9</sup> It more clearly expresses the foundation of Mary's role toward men. It avoids collision with the Pauline text on Christ the one Mediator.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps too it says something more to the heart of man. It does seem simple. And yet it too has its complexity. Mary's motherhood with regard to men does not have the same foundation as her motherhood with regard to Christ. For Mary brought Jesus into the world corporally; it is spiritually and by adoption that she became mother of her other children. If, as St. Augustine puts it, she is spiritually "mother of us who are members . . . she is not spiritually the mother of our Head the Savior; spiritually she is born of him." The undeniable unity that exists between these two motherhoods results from the unity of Mary's mission, from the manner in which grace develops in her, from the maternal resources of her feminine heart given over to her double task toward Christ and mankind, and finally from the unity of mankind in Christ.

### Queenship

Mary's queenship calls for several remarks in the same direction. Her queenship is only another way of signifying her place in glory near to Christ. In no sense does this queenship make Mary a distant sovereign. Her fulfillment in the life beyond earth does not destroy her humility or poverty, the very fabric of her glory. There is something more:

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 151–168. Chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium* speaks fourteen times of the role of Mary toward men.

10. It is because of this text of 1 Tim. 2:5–6 on the "one Mediator" that Pius XII abstained more and more from using the title "Mediatrice," which does not figure in his most solemn acts and gradually ceases to appear in his addresses. John XXIII and Paul VI constantly avoided use of the term.

Christ's royalty too is woven of poverty and humility. At the time of his triumphal entry on the day of palms, he chooses a donkey for his mount. His reign he established by descending to the depths of human suffering. About his royalty there is nothing in common with the kings of the earth, who are the more conscious of their kingship the more they are raised above their subjects. Christ is the king who *serves* his servants, as he taught in the parable (Lk. 12:37), and as he expressed in act in the washing of feet (Jn. 13:4–16). He calls his subjects to *reign with him*, as St. Paul testifies (2 Tim. 2:12). Certainly it is possible for us to consider Christ our king, since he is our God in his humanity. And we can consider Mary our queen, from the fact of her first place in the kingdom, near the king whose mother and most intimate associate she is. But we are not simply slaves and subjects in face of this king and queen. We are sharers in the same royalty. "I shall not call you servants any more, but friends," Jesus said (Jn. 15:15).

In short, all these titles given to Mary — Mother, mediatrix, queen, etc. — are summed up in the fact of the communion of saints where Mary is nearest to Christ.

### Eschatological Image within the Risen Church<sup>11</sup>

A last aspect of Mary's role refers to the future. It has to do with the exemplary and final causality she exercises with regard to the Church taken in its entirety. In the Virgin risen with Christ, the Church advancing toward the parousia already has realized the consummation of its mystery. In this first member, whose precedence still endures, the Church has attained her goal, her rest, and her fulfillment — bodily presence with Christ forever. In defining the dogma of the Assumption, Pius XII wanted to propose to the Church a renewed pledge of hope.

11. On this expression cf. *supra*, p. 181, n. 24.