



Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY

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Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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Assumed Into Heaven, Body and Soul

- ❖ At the end of her earthly life, the Virgin Mary was taken bodily to Heaven.
- ❖ The Bible refers to such a thing happening on at least two other occasions in salvation history, to Enoch and Elijah.
Cf. Gen. 5:24; 2 Kgs. 2:11; Heb. 11:5



Precursor to the Resurrection of the Dead

- ❖ Like the rising of the bodies of saints after the Crucifixion cf. Matt. 27:52, the Assumption is a precursor to the bodily resurrection of the faithful on Judgment Day, when they shall be “caught up ... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” 1 Thess. 4:17



Precursor to the Resurrection of the Dead

- ❖ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son’s Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians [S]he already shares in the glory of her Son’s Resurrection, anticipating the resurrection of all members of his Body.” Pars. 966, 974

Ark of the New Covenant



- ❖ We find biblical support for the Assumption in passages concerning the Ark of the Covenant, a type of Mary.
- ❖ The Ark was made of incorruptible wood and overlaid with pure gold because it was designed to carry the tablets of the Ten Commandments, which had been touched by God. Cf. Ex. 25:10-11
- ❖ If the Old Covenant Ark had to be pure and incorruptible to carry the word of God in stone, it is only fitting that Mary, who would carry the Word of God in Flesh, be likewise pure and incorrupt.



Ark of the New Covenant

- ❖ *Psalm* 132:8 declares: “Arise, O Lord, and go to thy resting place, thou and the ark of thy might.”
- ❖ Meditating on this verse in light of Mary’s role as the Ark of the New Covenant, Chrysippus of Jerusalem wrote in about 450 A.D., “The truly royal Ark, the most precious Ark, was the ever-Virgin *Theotokos* [Greek, “God-bearer”]; the Ark which received the treasure of all sanctification.” *On Psalm 132*
- ❖ That the Old-Testament Ark mysteriously vanished at a certain point in time further foreshadows Our Lady’s Assumption.
Cf. 2 Macc. 2:5



Ark of the New Covenant

- ❖ The Ark would remain hidden for centuries until Saint John caught a glimpse of it in Heaven, as he describes in the *Book of Revelation*: “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” 11:19, 12:1



Ark of the New Covenant

- ❖ John goes on to explain the Assumption in conjunction with Christ's Ascension, writing: "Her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. ... The woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time." Rev. 12:5-6, 14



Mary, the New Eve

- ❖ The Assumption is also related to Mary's role as the New Eve.
- ❖ The Church regards Mary as the New Eve because of her unique cooperation with Jesus Christ in the work of redemption (through her "Yes" to God at the Annunciation).
- ❖ Since she possessed Eve's innocence before the Fall, theologians have speculated that Mary may have been exempt from the Fall's punishment, namely labor pains and bodily death.



Mary, the New Eve

- ❖ Whether or not Mary actually experienced labor pains or death is not part of official Church teaching, however; and Catholics are free to believe either way on these matters.
- ❖ In defining the dogma of the Assumption, Pope Pius XII avoided saying for certain that Mary had died, merely stating she had “completed the course of her earthly life.” *Munificentissimus Deus* 44



Mary, the New Eve

- ❖ The doctrine of Mary, the New Eve was taught universally throughout the Church, in Asia Minor, Northern Africa, Rome, and elsewhere, from a very early date.
- ❖ In about the year 125, for example, the *Letter to Diognetus*, whose author identifies himself simply as “*Mathetes*” (Greek, “the disciple”) refers to Mary as a Virgin who cannot be deceived.
- ❖ Therefore, the New Eve doctrine is believed to have been propagated by the Apostles themselves.



Transitus Mariae

- ❖ The earliest extant writings on the Assumption are various apocryphal texts that come under the general heading of the *Transitus Mariae* or *Passing of Mary*.
- ❖ This literature existed virtually everywhere in the ancient world, appearing in multiple languages, including Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic, and Arabic.
- ❖ The early date and universality of the *Transitus Mariae* indicates the story is of apostolic origin.



Transitus Mariae

- ❖ The oldest surviving version of the *Transitus Mariae* is believed to have been written in the 2nd century by Leucius, a disciple of the Apostle John, who eventually fell into heresy.
- ❖ Leucius' writing may be based on an original document from the apostolic era which is no longer extant.



Transitus Mariae

- ❖ Around the year 400, an orthodox writer operating under the *nom de plume* of Melito of Sardis, reproached Leucius for having “corrupted the most ancient text [on the Assumption] by expounding his personal ideas which do not agree with the teaching of the Apostles.”

The Passing of the Holy Virgin

- ❖ This author endeavored to restore the true account of the Assumption, which he alleged Leucius had “corrupted with an evil pen.” Ibid.



Transitus Mariae

- ❖ Critics have questioned why, if the Assumption is a genuine Christian belief, orthodox Church writers did not speak of it earlier than the 4th or 5th centuries.
- ❖ It should be noted, however, that the orthodox writers of the earlier period did not act to correct belief in the Assumption either.
- ❖ They simply remained silent on the matter—an unprecedented stance if it was an heretical teaching, especially given the prevalence of the *Transitus Mariae* throughout the ancient world.



Transitus Mariae

- ❖ It is unlikely that the Assumption, which upholds the dignity of the human body, originated among the Gnostics or other early heretical groups, who denounced the body and all things physical.
- ❖ The apocryphal writings, in fact, were often written by orthodox Christians, who sought to impose details upon real events from the lives of Christ and the Saints that were otherwise shrouded in mystery.



In the Patristic Writings

- ❖ While the earliest Church Fathers do not explicitly speak of the Assumption, it is implied in their writings.
- ❖ Saint Hippolytus of Rome, for example, writing in about 215, compares Mary's flesh to the “incorruptible timber” of the Ark.
Commentary on Psalm 22 [23]



In the Patristic Writings

- ❖ In 377, Saint Epiphanius of Salamis wrote, “How will holy Mary not possess the kingdom of heaven with her flesh, since she was not unchaste, nor dissolute, nor did she ever commit adultery, and since she never did anything wrong as far as fleshly actions are concerned, but remained stainless?”

Panárion 42:12



Further Evidence

- ❖ Perhaps the greatest proof of the Assumption is the fact that no city in history has ever claimed to have Mary's mortal remains.
- ❖ This is significant given the Church's penchant for venerating the relics of the saints.



The Dogma Proclaimed

- ❖ In 1950, Pope Pius XII elevated the ancient belief in the bodily Assumption of Mary into Heaven to the level of a dogma, the highest level of Church teaching.
- ❖ The Holy Father stated: “By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”

Munificentissimus Deus 44



The Dogma Proclaimed

- ❖ What are we to make of the fact that the Assumption of Mary was not dogmatically defined by the Church until the mid-20th century?
- ❖ We might consider, by way of comparison, that the doctrine of the Divinity of Christ was not dogmatically defined until 325 (Council of Nicaea); the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, 381 (Constantinople); Two Natures in Christ, 451 (Chalcedon); Two Wills in Christ, 681 (Third Constantinople); Transubstantiation, 1215 (Fourth Lateran), Canon of the Bible, 1546 (Trent), and the Immaculate Conception, 1854 (*Ineffabilis Deus*).



The Dogma Proclaimed

- ❖ Each of these doctrines, like the Assumption, had always been believed by the Church, though not officially declared a dogma until it became necessary or beneficial to do so.
- ❖ Often this process has been brought on by significant controversy over an essential doctrine, which threatened to divide the faithful.
- ❖ This was not the case with the Assumption though.
- ❖ The Assumption has always been universally accepted by the Church without controversy.



The Dogma Proclaimed

- ❖ One can see God's loving wisdom in willing the proclamation of Mary's Assumption to the world of the 20th century, which witnessed so many grave injustices against the dignity of the human body and human person.



The Dogma Proclaimed

- ❖ At the time of the dogma's proclamation, the world was emerging from the horrors of the Nazi death camps and swiftly approaching the state-protected killing of the unborn child.
- ❖ The nobility of the woman and her prime vocation of motherhood have especially been assaulted by modern society, which has focused inordinately on her external beauty and sought to reduce her to an object of lust.
- ❖ The Assumption of Mary declares the dignity of womanhood and of the human person in a powerful way.



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