

Apostles in their preaching directs the Church to the full understanding of what is contained in the deposit of faith. In the words of Yves Congar, O.P.: “What the body of the Church together with its pastors, agreed in holding as of faith is part of revelation, since the Church filled and assisted by the Holy Spirit, cannot be wrong on a matter of faith. This has always been the conviction of the Catholic Church both Eastern and Western” (Tradition and Traditions, [1966] 203, London and New York).

If you ask how this common faith developed only gradually in the consciousness of the people in the beginning, it is answered that the pastors first instructed the faithful from the Scriptures that included reference to the place of Mary. The people understood the close relationship of the Mother of Jesus from the moment of the Incarnation until his death on the Cross. Gradually they began to believe that the Mother of God who was intimately associated with her son in his mission of salvation, who was sinless and virginal, would not be subject to corruption after death. Close to Jesus in life she would be with him after death. Thus enlightened by the Holy Spirit, belief in the Assumption of Mary slowly grew. Pius XII explained: *“Christ’s faithful, through the teaching and the leadership of their pastors have learned from the sacred books that the Virgin Mary, throughout the course of her earthly pilgrimage, led a life troubled by cares, hardships and sorrow, and that, moreover, what the old holy man Simeon had foretold actually came to pass, that is, that a terribly sharp sword pierced her heart as she stood under the cross of her divine son, our Redeemer. In the same way, it was not too difficult for them to affirm that the great Mother of God, like her only begotten Son, had actually passed from this life. But this in no way prevented them from believing and from professing openly that her sacred body had never been subject to the corruption of the tomb, and that the august tabernacle of the Divine Word had never been reduced to dust and ashes”* (MD 69)

That this faith existed among the people can be proven from the many testimonies and traces that have come down through the ages. For example, we have many churches both in the East and the West that have been dedicated to our Lady under the title

of the Assumption. There are also the countless images of our Lady that appeared in churches in many lands that tell the story of her death and Assumption. A vast body of literature, especially homilies, began to proclaim the praises of the Lady taken up to heaven, not to mention the liturgical celebrations that have been continuous since the sixth century.

In heaven she belongs to the communion of saints, although the most perfect member. Moreover, she is exalted as a woman who takes her place at the side of Christ.

The strongest proof for the Assumption according to “Munificentissimus Deus” is the unanimous faith of the people and their pastors. This remarkable accord of the Catholic bishops and faithful enlightened by the Holy Spirit existed in the Church for centuries. In a matter of so great importance that Church cannot make a mistake or be deceived for the Lord himself promised to be with the Church until the end of time. Pope Pius XII, therefore, do not receive or claim to receive a new revelation from above, nor did he invent a new doctrine of the Church. He simply declared in his definition what the faithful and the bishops had already believed. In a word, he was dependent on the lived faith of the people. It would be more accurate to say the Pope defined the Assumption because Catholics believed in it, than to say Catholics believed in it because the Pope defined it.

For further information, I would recommend “Munificentissimus Deus”, “The Assumption of Mary” by Killian Healy, O. Carm., from which I quoted in the above post. “Queen of the Universe, An Anthology on the Assumption and Queenship of Mary”, Mathews, Stanley. Grail 1957 St. Meinrad Indiana; and “The Glorious Assumption of the Mother of God”, Duhr, Joseph, S.J., NY: P.J. Kennedy & Sons c. 1950.

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Pamphlet 028

The Assumption of Mary into Heaven

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What is the proof or the testimony for the Assumption? On what grounds can Catholics say this is a truth revealed by God?

Scripture is silent about the final destiny of Mary. The last reference it makes of her is that she was present with the Apostles after the resurrection of Jesus as they were united in prayer awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture has a very important part to play for Christians in their approach to the doctrine of the Assumption. This has always been true and the Holy Father in the document of definition not only refers to the use of Scripture by the Doctors of the Church and the theologians in their defense of the doctrine, but he himself states clearly that the reality of the Assumption is based on the Scriptures as its ultimate foundation.

But if there is no explicit statement in Scripture proclaiming the Assumption, do we have testimony to the event during apostolic times? Unfortunately, no. There is no evidence of the first five centuries of Christianity supporting the Assumption. In other words we do not have a positive oral tradition of apostolic origin regarding the final end of Mary.

Because there is no scriptural statement or apostolic tradition in the early Church, the Holy Father in his definition of the dogma was not able to appeal to those sources. In fact, he did not even refer to this matter. He looked elsewhere for his proof.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that complete silence existed in the early Church concerning the final end of Mary. As a matter of fact there was a whole body of apocryphal literature in the early Church. As history, this material has little value, but it does have some theological value. Some would say that we should study this literature more carefully, for it may contain some valuable historical information. Be that as it may, here we can look at it from a theological point of view. It is probably the oldest written testimony of Mary’s Assumption. It

was used by the homilists of the seventh and eighth centuries. However, since it contains many inaccuracies both historical and theological, it is not even alluded to in the papal Bull of the definition. Nevertheless, it bears witness to a widespread belief in the Assumption among Christians from at least the fifth century. The apocryphal literature supposes a faith already existing among at least some of the faithful concerning the glorious end of Mary. It is an attempt, often bizarre, to explain her last days, her burial and her bodily Assumption. Faith gave rise to legends. These in turn influenced the preaching of the homilists.

From the foregoing, it is clear that notwithstanding the relative influence of apocryphal literature, there is no explicit reliable proof in Scripture or early tradition in favor of the Assumption. Does it necessarily follow that the Assumption is not revealed truth? Must we say that it is either a new doctrine, an invention, a conclusion from theological reasoning, or perhaps a dogmatic fact connected with revealed truth to which it is related? None of these conclusions is valid. For there is such a thing as implicit revelation, namely one truth can be hidden and contained in others, and only gradually come to our understanding. Just as there are many truths in nature that only gradually come to light, for example, that the earth is round and moves around the sun, so in the realm of God's revelation to man a truth is uncovered rather than discovered. For example, the consubstantiality of the Word of God with the Father is implied in the truth that is the Word of God, but it was explicitly stated and proclaimed a dogma only in the fourth century at the Council of Nicaea. It is important to recall that there is one central mystery revealed to us, Jesus Christ, and all other mysteries are contained in him.

When God chose to reveal his plan of salvation he did not even speak in words; he sent his Son, Jesus Christ. He revealed a person. Christ is the messenger and the message. Revelation is not only what Christ taught by words, but what he taught by his actions, by his very presence among us. Often the Apostles would learn by being with Christ without forming clear concepts and judgments. They were open to the mystery of Christ, and would learn only gradually

and would see him in different ways. For St. Paul, he was the Redeemer, for St. John, the Word, the truth and the light. It is the totality of all the impressions Christ made that forms the deposit of faith. In this would be included his mother Mary. The Apostles witnessed the unique relationship of Jesus and Mary and her mediation at Cana, her faith, her fidelity to Christ as she stood at the foot of the Cross, and her association with them as they prayed waiting for the Holy Spirit after his resurrection and ascension. They were in some way aware of her place in his life and mission. The mystery of Mary is contained in the mystery of Christ.

With the death of the last Apostle, the deposit of faith came to a close. This deposit is rich but no detailed inventory of all the truths revealed and referred to was ever made by the Apostles. Some truths more evident than others were quickly formulated and proclaimed in the Church, but even more would be formulated and proclaimed in the future because of the richness of the mystery of Christ. As time goes by, the understanding of Christ and his mission will become even more perfect in the Church.

To express this another way, and specifically in relation to the subject at hand, the Assumption is not a core doctrine of the Christian faith, but is implicitly contained in Mary's unique relationship with Jesus her son, with whom she was intimately associated in his mission of redemption. Only after the Church came to a more profound understanding of Jesus and his mission could it consider more explicitly Mary and her role in the work of salvation. From this study and contemplation a better understanding of Mary in God's plan of salvation gradually developed. And so we should not be surprised that the Second Vatican Council speaks of a hierarchy of truths in which some are closer to the heart of the faith than others, although all are revealed. The Council states; "When comparing doctrines, they [i.e. Catholics engaged in ecumenical considerations, etc.] should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or 'Hierarchy of truths' since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith" (*Decree on Ecumenism*, 11.).

Consequently, we readily admit a development in the understanding of the truths revealed by God. We acknowledge that only with time do we come to perceive some truths that are less central than others. Among these truths is the Assumption. Another observation of the Council is helpful here. "There is growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers...For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 8).

I hope that these observations will help you to understand the argument the Holy Father offered in the document of the definition to demonstrate that the Assumption is a revealed truth. He did not present explicit texts from Scripture or apostolic Tradition from the very beginning of the Church because there was none to offer. He did not appeal to the Apocrypha because of their doubtful and suspect character. How then, did the Holy Father prove that the Assumption is a revealed truth contained in the deposit of faith given to the Apostles?

His approach is very positive and in no way defensive. He first presents his strongest argument for the belief in the Assumption, and then offers other testimonies, that confirm it.

What was his first principle argument? It is the universal faith of all the Church, that is the unanimous belief of the whole Church, the faithful and their pastors. In this faith they cannot be in error. In his own words: "From the universal agreement of the Church's ordinary teaching that the Blessed Virgin Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven...is a truth that has been revealed by God and consequently something that must be firmly and faithfully believed by all children of the Church" (*Munificentissimus Deus*, 68).

But does this prove that the Assumption is a revealed reality, a fact? Could not the Church be in error? No. For their pastors (moral unanimity is understood), the Church is protected from error. It is infallibly assisted by the Holy Spirit that preserves it in truth. The same Holy Spirit that inspired the