

The Assumption of Mary

by Sebastian R. Fama

Catholics believe that at the end of her earthly life, Mary the mother of Jesus was assumed bodily into heaven. Objections to this doctrine are based on a number of false assumptions (no pun intended). The chief of which is the idea that in order for any doctrine to be legitimate it must be explicitly taught in Scripture. The doctrine of Mary's Assumption, just like the doctrine of the Trinity, is not explicitly taught in Scripture. However, in both cases Scripture provides us with plenty of evidence to support them.

There are two passages in Scripture that speak of someone being assumed into heaven: "**By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death**; and he was not found, because God had taken him" (Hebrews 11:5). Also, "A chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. **And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven**" (2 Kings 2:11). Everyone agrees that Enoch and Elijah were bodily assumed into heaven. Logically then, all should agree that the same was possible for Mary. **1. Scripture teaches us that it was possible.**

The Assumption of Mary is further consistent with Scripture as it is the logical result of her Immaculate Conception (the fact that she was conceived without sin [Genesis 3:15]). Death and corruption in the grave are the consequences of sin: "You are dust and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). Mary was sinless. Thus, her being assumed body and soul into heaven was natural and to be expected. **2. Scripture implies that it was likely.**

The fact that it is not explicitly taught in Scripture would not mean that it didn't happen. One thing we do find in Scripture is the establishment of an authoritative Church. For instance, the Church is "The pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). And rejection of the Church is rejection of Christ: "Whoever rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10:16). Concerning itself Scripture says: "First of all you must understand this, that **no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation**" (2 Peter 1:20).

So, Scripture tells us that you can't privately interpret the Bible. And it also tells us that the Church is the pillar and foundation of truth. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that only the Church has the ability to teach without error. And of course, that Church would be the Catholic Church. No other church would qualify as no other church was established by Jesus Christ. **3. Scripture shows us that the Church, and not the individual, has the authority to teach.**

In 1950 Pope Pius XII formally defined the doctrine of the Assumption. **4. The Church in its authority proclaims the bodily assumption of Mary.**

To recap:

1. Scripture teaches us that it was possible
2. Scripture implies that it was likely
3. Scripture shows us that the Church and not the individual has authority to teach
4. The Church in its authority proclaims the bodily assumption of Mary

Pope Pius XII was not teaching something new. References to the Assumption of Mary are made early on. At the end of the third century Melito wrote:

If therefore it might come to pass by the power of your grace, it has appeared right to us your servants that, as you, having overcome death, do reign in glory, **so you should raise up the body of your Mother and take her with you, rejoicing, into heaven.** Then said the Savior [Jesus]: "Be it done according to your will (*The Passing of the Virgin* 16:2-17 [A.D. 300]).

Another example from the early Church comes to us from Timothy of Jerusalem. He proclaimed: "Therefore the Virgin is immortal to this day, seeing that **he who had dwelt in her transported her to the regions of her assumption** (*Homily on Simeon and Anna* [A.D. 400]).

The Church does not say whether or not Mary died. When Pius XII defined the doctrine of the Assumption in 1950, he simply said that Mary "**having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory**" (*Munificentissimus Deus* 44). Whether or not she died has been a matter of speculation for centuries. Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia, wrote the following in **376 AD**: "Whether she died or was buried we know not" (*Panarion* 78:2). If she did die, it would present no conflict with Scripture, as she did not remain in the grave. We saw earlier in Genesis 3:19 that the penalty for sin was not merely death but death and all that would normally accompany it, i.e. bodily corruption (to dust you shall return Genesis 3:19).

The Assumption of Mary was not a theological necessity. Rather it was fitting that the Mother of our Savior be honored in this way. In the words of St. John Damascene, an early father and doctor of the Church:

It was fitting that she, who had kept her virginity intact in childbirth, should keep her own body free from all corruption even after death. It was fitting that she, who had carried the Creator as a child at her breast, should dwell in the divine tabernacles. It was fitting that the spouse, whom the Father had taken to himself, should live in the divine mansions. It was fitting that she, who had seen her Son upon the cross and who had thereby received into her heart the sword of sorrow which she had escaped in the act of giving birth to him, should look upon him as he sits with the Father. It was fitting that God's Mother should possess what belongs to her Son, and that she should be honored by every creature as the Mother and as the handmaid of God (*Dormition of Mary* [A.D. 697]).

St. Robert Bellarmine was even more descriptive. He wrote:

And who, I ask, could believe that the ark of holiness, the dwelling place of the Word of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, could be reduced to ruin? My soul is filled with horror at the thought that this virginal flesh which had begotten God, had brought him into the world, had nourished and carried him, could have been turned into ashes or given over to be food for worms (*The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*).

Being assumed bodily into heaven does not make Mary equal to Jesus. Jesus ascended into heaven by His own power. Mary on the other hand was assumed into heaven. When someone is assumed into heaven it is an act of God and not the individual. Someday all the saved will be assumed into heaven: "For the hour is coming when **all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth; those who have done good, to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment**" (John 5:28-29).

Christians have always honored those who have gone on to be with the Lord. Cities that possessed the bones of saintly people proudly proclaimed the fact. However, there are no records of any city claiming possession of Mary's remains. And that is because there were none to claim.

Protestants are very vocal in their opposition to Mary receiving any special honor. They have been taught and they fear that any special honor given to Mary diminishes the glory given to God. However, God Himself honored Mary above all other women. He did so when He chose her to bear His Son. Are we wrong to honor who God honors? As the God Bearer Mary is the ark of the New Covenant. She is disciple number one. Her faith is something to be admired and emulated. We honor her because of her unique role in salvation history.

Do we not routinely honor those who have been a blessing to us? We honor pastors for 25 years of faithful service. We honor veterans for their sacrifices in war. And we even honor sports figures for their accomplishments. So why not honor the woman whose yes to God made our salvation possible? When all is said and done I believe we can whole heartedly agree with Elizabeth when she says to Mary: "Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:42).