

What Does Mary Teach about the Resurrection of the Dead?

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Seven months before I was born, in 1950, Pope Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's Assumption into heaven. At the end of her earthly life, the pope said, Mary's body was never "subject to the corruption of the tomb" or "reduced to dust and ashes" (*Munificentissimus Deus*, par. 14). On the contrary, her body was assumed into heaven and glorified. She was glorified because of her role in the Incarnation. From the Virgin Mary, said Pope Pius, Jesus "received human flesh" (par. 29). The Holy Father described Mary's Assumption as a privilege she had received for being the mother of the redeemer. She had given birth to Jesus, had raised him, and she stood by him to the end.

My title this evening is a question, "What Does Mary Teach about the Resurrection of the Dead?" Without reflecting about it, our first answer might be "nothing." Mary does not teach anything about the final resurrection because she's not dead. Ever since her Assumption into heaven, she has reigned there, sitting at the right hand of the redeemer.

But to say that Mary teaches nothing about the resurrection of the dead would be to ignore a recent shift in our understanding of Mary. We began to see this shift in 1950, the year that her Assumption was solemnly defined. This evening I will describe Marian piety at that time. Then I will describe the shift that occurred between 1950 and the publication in 1965 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II's *Lumen gentium*. Ever since the council, Mary has been understood less as a heavenly queen and more as a role model for us Christians who ask what it means to say yes to God – and what we can hope for at the end of time.

The Context of Popular Devotion

When Pope Pius XII defined the Assumption of Mary in 1950, Harry Truman was president. The Korean War was raging. One month before the definition of the dogma, on October 8, two American fighter bombers mistakenly flew more than sixty miles into the Soviet Union, not far from North Korea, and strafed a Soviet base. The US had to formally apologize for the incursion. Our country was in the depths of the Cold War. The US and the USSR had nuclear weapons and professed a willingness to use them.

In 1950, the Catholic Church's definition of Mary's Assumption into heaven reverberated throughout the world. For us, Mary symbolized Christian faith as a bulwark against Communist atheism. Her Magnificat promised to "cast down the might from their thrones" and to raise up the lowly – not by a proletarian revolution or by class warfare, but by faith in God. Mary was a rallying-cry of the Church's opposition to a modern world. Ever since the French Revolution, that modern world was increasingly alienated from Christianity.

Mary's role as an opposition figure was apparent as early as 1830. In that year, Catherine Labouré, a French member of St. Vincent de Paul's Daughters of Charity, experienced visions of the Virgin Mary. The story of her experience was popularized in the form of the "Miraculous Medal," worn by millions of Catholics to this day. The image of Mary stood for the permanence of faith in a world of cultural change and irreligious feeling.

Eight years later, on December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* stated that Mary was free from the stain of original sin starting at the moment of her conception. All other human beings had inherited original sin from their parents, but not Mary. Four years after the papal definition, in 1858, Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes, a grotto in the Pyrenees. The 14-year-old daughter of the town's baker quoted the Virgin Mary herself. "I am," she said, "the Immaculate Conception."

At that time, in 1858, devotion to Mary was linked to support for the papacy. Ten years earlier, in 1848, Pope Gregory XVI was forced to flee Rome. Giuseppe Garibaldi, an anti-clerical politician, had launched a civil war in Italy. At the end of the civil war, Italy was a unified country and the papal states were no more. Twenty-two years later, in 1870, Pius IX convened the First Vatican Council. By that time, the church had no territory at all, apart from the Vatican quarter in Rome. Pius IX was even called a "prisoner of the Vatican." To many Catholics, he was making a last heroic stand for Christian values in the face of the philosophic Enlightenment and the Age of Revolution. Marian devotion brought the Catholic world's attention to the precarious situation of the church in relation to the modern world.

Eamon Duffy, Professor of History at Cambridge, has this to say about the nineteenth century in church history. It was time during which the Catholic world, as he said, "held the Pope in almost mystical reverence." Devotion to the Holy Father, Duffy continued,

was just one aspect of a devotional revolution within Catholicism, away from the sober decorum of eighteenth century religion towards a more emotional and colourful religion of the heart, a new emphasis on ceremonial, on the saints, on the Virgin Mary.¹

That was the historical context of popular Catholic devotion to Mary. It was emotional. It reacted against the French Revolution and against atheism. Marian piety echoed throughout the world of theology. Pope Leo XIII referred to the Virgin Mary as the "co-redemptrix," saying that she, with Jesus, redeemed the human race. The pope also called her the "mediatrix" of all graces, meaning that Mary intercedes for humanity and that Jesus bestows graces through her.² The pope did not define these terms in a solemn way or invoke his infallible teaching authority. But to him Mary was a powerful champion against anti-religious movements in Europe.

In February of 1917, the Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin revolted against the Russia nobility. The Bolsheviks promised to end Russia's involvement in World War I, to give land to the peasants, and to bring an end to famine. In that same year, 1917, three shepherd children reported seeing the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima in Portugal. The children received a prophecy that prayer would lead to the end of World War I. Lúcia dos Santos, one of the three children, was ten years old at the time. She entered religious life and, in her twenties and thirties, she published several memoirs. In them she revealed two secrets of the Virgin Mary. One was a vision of hell and the other recommended devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Sr. Lúcia also communicated a third secret that was made public in the year 2000, a vision having to do

¹ Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, Third Edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997, 2006), p. 291.

² Leo XIII referred to Mary as Coredemptrix and Mediatrix in two of his "Rosary Encyclicals," *Iucunda semper expectatione* (Sept. 8, 1894) and *Fidentem piumque* (Sept. 20, 1896).

with the death of a pope. In the Catholic world, Marian apparitions were a tangible link between heaven and earth.

The link between the papacy, Russia, and the Virgin Mary continued into my lifetime. In 1952, the year after I was born, Pope Pius XII consecrated Russia to the Blessed Virgin. When I was a boy, my mother gathered us children in the living room after dinner. We prayed the rosary for the conversion of Russia. In my parochial school, we sang “Bring Flowers of the Fairest” and crowned a girl as Queen of the May. Marian devotion was a counterpoint to atheist Communism. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, seemed like answers to prayer. Today we witness Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Four days ago, on March 25, Pope Francis repeated the gesture of Pope Pius XII and consecrated Russia and Ukraine to Mary.³ Commentators have compared Vladimir Putin’s invasion to the tactics of Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. It might seem that we are re-living the 1950s and 1960s.

But much has happened to Marian devotion between 1952, when Pius XII consecrated Russia to the Blessed Virgin, and last month’s invasion of Ukraine. Part of the change is due to an appreciation of Mary in New Testament terms, and part of the change is due to a link between Mary’s Assumption and the resurrection of the dead. Let me make some comments about the “biblical Mary” and about what I call the “eschatological Mary.” *After that I will ask you to discuss how you regard the person of Mary and whether you agree that our Catholic understanding of Mary has changed. I believe it has, and to that change I now turn.*

The Biblical Mary

To describe how our understanding of Mary has changed, I’d like to bring us back to 1951. In that the year the German theologian, Karl Rahner, completed a 344-page book on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁴ Father Rahner submitted his book for review to his Jesuit superiors. At the time he was 46 years old. He had been a professor of theology at an Austrian seminary for fifteen years. He had distinguished himself with numerous publications. One year earlier, Pope Pius XII had formally defined the Assumption, and Rahner thought his book was timely. Imagine his disappointment when the Jesuit superiors refused him permission to publish his work. They said that it was too speculative, that it was insufficiently grounded, and that it reached far beyond the scope of a work on Mary. Rahner’s book was not published until 2004, twenty years after his death.

Today we know why the Jesuit censors were nervous.⁵ Rahner presented Mary, not in the language of nineteenth-century theology, but in biblical terms. She was less the Queen of Heaven than the mother of the Lord. She was not so much a transcendent symbol of God’s power on earth, but rather an historical person who was essential to the Incarnation of God’s

³ The [Vatican News](#) announced that the consecration of Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary will be pronounced on March 25 at St. Peter’s in communion with churches throughout the world.

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*, pp. 3-347 of Rahner’s *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 9, *Maria, Mutter des Herrn*, edited by Regina Pacis Meyer (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004).

⁵ Mark F. Fischer, “Karl Rahner’s Work on the Assumption of Mary into Heaven,” *Philosophy and Theology* 32:1/2 (2020): 265-282.

Word. She was no longer the champion of the popes in their battle against the forces of revolution and atheism. Instead she was the one who gave birth to Jesus, who raised him with St. Joseph, and who stood beneath his cross. As Jesus' mother, Mary was a woman of her time, a Jew, a spouse, a member of an extended family. Rahner disentangled Mary from the symbolic role she played in a Catholicism threatened by the forces of the modern world. His biblical view of Mary was a departure from the Mariology of his time.

Rahner's theology was affirmed at Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium* devoted a chapter to Mary. It focused on her role in salvation history. It called her one of the redeemed (LG 53). It stated that she symbolizes all Christians. The Church prays to her as a sign of hope. She is "invoked" as mediatrix (LG 16, 62), but not declared to be the mediator of all graces. Her role lay in "serving the mystery of the redemption" (LG 56), but not as a coredeptrix. Mary, the council said, is the "sign of true hope and comfort for the pilgrim people of God." The image of Mary was grounded in Scripture and presented in relation to humanity's aspirations. Vatican II signaled a shift in our understanding of Mary.

The Eschatological Mary

One way to describe this shift in understanding is to use the term "eschatology." Eschatology is the branch of theology that considers the four "last things": death, judgment, heaven and hell. When Pope Pius described Mary's Assumption into heaven, he said that she had "overcome death" (*Munificentissimus Deus*, par. 40). That does not necessarily mean that she never died. It does not mean that her death was only a "dormition" (or kind of sleep). It does not say that, in this sleep, she made a painless "transitus" (or transition) into heaven. The definition of the Assumption asserts that her body was glorified and did not suffer corruption. It was a "glorified" body that was raised, along with her soul, into heaven. Mary's Assumption was a kind of resurrection. Her Assumption was eschatological in that it prefigured the final resurrection of the dead that we Christians profess in the creed. *In a few moments, I'm going to ask you to reflect on whether your understanding of Mary has developed and how. But for now, let me explain how Karl Rahner and theologians of his generation showed the connection between Mary and eschatology.*

The problem posed by Mary's Assumption is historical. Rahner put it this way. He said that it was a "shocking but true fact" (p. 51) that the earliest Christian centuries knew nothing about Mary's earthly end. Only from about the sixth century do we have records discussing the end of her life. When Pius XII defined Mary's Assumption into heaven, he could not cite evidence in records from the first five centuries. Perhaps the first written testimony was that of St. John Damascene, who lived from approximately 675 to 749 AD. He was early, but still centuries removed from the Apostles. There is also testimony from ancient liturgical books, such as the Gelasian sacramentary. It was named after Pope Gelasius, who reigned from 492-496. A copy of the Gelasian sacramentary, which includes prayers to Mary as assumed into heaven, exists from the eighth century. But the first five centuries say nothing about Mary's Assumption.

When the dogma was defined in 1950, Rahner grappled with the historical problem. How could Pope Pius define something about which the Scriptures are silent? A solemn definition from a pope means that a teaching is part of divine tradition. It goes back to the Apostles. But there are no records of the Assumption in the first centuries. What links this Marian privilege to the Apostolic faith?

Rahner answered the question in this way. The definition of Mary's Assumption does not represent, he said, a new teaching, something unknown to the earliest Christians. It is a dogma, and all dogma goes back to the Apostolic generation. Pope Pius could not be defining a "new" dogma, Rahner said. Mary's Assumption must be about something we have known all along. The dogma, said Rahner, is about the final resurrection. All Christians profess a belief that Christ "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." In the creed we say that we "look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." Mary's Assumption restates that faith. Her bodily transition from earth to heaven foreshadows the fate of all Christians. All of us look forward to the end of time. Mary goes before us as the first of the redeemed. At the end of her life, she experienced a resurrection. Her assumption anticipates the general resurrection of the dead when our bodies will be raised at the end of time.

With Rahner I first discovered the intrinsic connection between Mariology and eschatology. The connection lies precisely in Mary's Assumption. This was not a unique event that happened to Mary because she was the mother of the Lord and that could never happen to anyone else. The Assumption did not set Mary apart from the rest of believing Christians. Rahner showed that the privilege of being raised body and soul into heaven is a foretaste of what God has in store for all of us. All Christians profess the resurrection of the dead. What does the bodily resurrection mean, if not a promise that we will achieve our rightful place as God's children at the end of time? The insistence of Pope Pius XII on the Assumption of Mary's soul and body into heaven points to the resurrection of the flesh.

Let's take stock of what we have said up to this point. Between Pope Pius' definition of the Assumption and Vatican II – that is, between 1950 and 1965 – the Catholic understanding of Mary shifted. Catholics began to regard Mary less as a heavenly queen and more as a mother whose son transformed the world. At that time, we began to see Mary as the first of the redeemed whose Assumption foreshadowed the general resurrection of the dead. Karl Rahner failed during his lifetime to publish his book on Mary, but his biblical and eschatological understanding of Mary bore fruit at the Second Vatican Council. There the Fathers called Mary "the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come" (LG 68). She is our representative. She represents what we hope to be when God perfects us.

Let's pause at this point and reflect together. What is our experience of Mary and how has it grown and developed? You've heard my answer. In the years between 1950 and 1962 – that is, in the years between the definition of the Assumption of Mary and the Second Vatican Council – the Catholic understanding of Mary shifted. Before Vatican II, Mary was linked to the Church's opposition to the modern world. It was a world in which the forces of democracy, materialism, and religious skepticism threatened the papacy and the *ancien régime*, that is, the unity between the nobility of Europe and the papacy. After Vatican II, Mary was presented in biblical terms as a woman of Nazareth, a Jew, a spouse, and a mother. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson, came to be seen as "truly our sister."⁶ Mary's Assumption into heaven did not set her apart from believers and did not make her the enemy of the modern world. Instead, her Assumption anticipated our own resurrection at the end of time. *My question is this: Do you agree? Has your understanding of Mary changed, and what does she represent for you?*

⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003). See the section "From Transcendent Symbol to Historical Person," pp. 95-101.

Mary and Our Future

In the time we have left, I'd like to pose three questions. The three questions are about the final judgment at the end of time, about the redemption of all believers, and about the significance of death. The second Vatican Council, we said, regarded Mary in biblical terms and as an eschatological figure. The council taught us to see Mary as the mother of the Lord and as "sign of true hope and comfort for the people of God." Her Assumption into heaven anticipates our final resurrection. At that time Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. But what is this final judgment? Why do we profess it?

Final Judgment. Our questions starts with the relation between the final judgment (at the end of time) and the immediate judgment (at the moment of death). We know these things well, but they still challenge us. All Christians believe that God judges us. Death brings to an end our earthly sojourn. At death, our lives are complete. The soul separates from the body. The body decays in the tomb, but the soul is immortal. These truths were defined in the year 1274, during the second General Council of Lyons. The council insisted that the souls of the just, separated from their bodies, are cleansed after death and received into heaven. We think of St. Peter at the pearly gates, consulting the book of our lives. We call this the "immediate" or "particular" judgment.

In addition to that immediate judgement there is the final judgment. At the end of time, the resurrected bodies of the just and unjust will be gathered before Christ. He will come in glory and separate the righteous from evildoers like sheep from goats. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says this about the final judgment: "The Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do" (CCC 1039). The final judgment is the sign that God's justice triumphs over the unjust.

Christians believe in both the immediate and the final judgement. But why are there two judgments? Surely God does not need a second judgment. God does not change his mind. The key phrase in the Catechism are the two words, "furthest consequences." God will judge the furthest consequences of our deeds. At death, we are judged on our particular merits or demerits. That is the particular judgment. After our deaths, however, history does not stop. The lives of the dead (that is, our lives) continue to have consequences. God reveals something at the final judgement that was not yet visible at the immediate judgement. God reveals, not just the judgement of an individual, but the furthest consequences for all humanity. A "corporate judgment" manifests God's intentions. It is the realization of our prayer, "Thy kingdom come."

This may seem terrifying, but Mary's Assumption makes it seem less so. She said yes to God and carried Jesus in her womb. She raised him with her husband. At her son's death, she stood beneath his cross. Later, at the end of her life, God welcomed her into heaven. She did not stand apart from us. She stands with us as the first of the redeemed. Her Assumption gives us reason to hope that God will welcome us at the end of our lives. God raised her body and soul to heaven. At the end of time, God will bring his plan of salvation to fulfillment in us.

Redemption. Let's move from the final judgment to our second question, the one about Mary's redemption. We Catholics profess belief in Mary as the Immaculate Conception. Unlike every other human being, Mary was preserved from the guilt of original sin. Some theologians have speculated that Mary, on account of this privilege, regained the gifts lost by Adam and Eve.

Recall that, after the Fall, God punished Adam and Eve. Eve would have pain at childbirth. Adam would have to toil for the rest of his life. Both would die and return to the dust (Gen. 3: 16-19). Freedom from pain, from toil, and from death are the gifts of nature that Adam and Eve lost. Some speculate that Mary retained these gifts. According to their theory, she had no pain in childbirth, she did not suffer during her life, and she never experienced death. Vatican II said nothing about this. But we can be certain that Mary did suffer. Before the birth of Jesus, Simeon prophesied that a sword would pierce Mary's heart. Did Mary retain the gifts lost by Adam and Eve? The Church has never said so.

Mary's redemption was taught by Vatican II. *Lumen gentium* described her in this way: "Redeemed, in a more exalted fashion by reason of the merits of her Son and united to him by a close and indissoluble tie, she is endowed with the high office and dignity of the Mother of the Son of God" (LG 53). Even though Mary has a high office and dignity, she remained one with us. She was the first of the redeemed.

Nowhere do we read that Mary was redeemed *from* anything. She was redeemed because Christ redeemed us all. Mary belongs to the human race for whom Christ died. Vatican II explained the redemption of Mary in relation to our redemption. Mary was exalted by the Lord, we read, "that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of Lords and conqueror of sin and death" (LG 59). Both her Assumption into heaven and our final resurrection have a purpose. It is that we might be more fully conformed to Christ. That was as true for Mary as it is for us. In Jesus we see the unity of God's nature and of our human nature. That is the unity to which all of us, including Mary, are called.

The Significance of Death. Now that we have discussed our first question (the final judgement at the end of time) and our second (the redemption of Mary), let us consider our third question. It is about the significance of death. Earlier I said that, in the opinion of some theologians, Mary did not die. Because she was free from original sin, these theologians argue, she never lost the original gifts of painlessness and immortality that belonged to Adam and Eve. Some say that, at the end of her life, Mary experienced a "dormition." She did not die but fell asleep. Her Assumption was not preceded by death, but simply marked a "transitus" or transition from earth to heaven.

Behind these theories is the story of Adam and Eve. After they succumbed to the temptation of Satan, God punished them. They became susceptible to death. From this biblical standpoint, death is an evil. It is the consequence of original sin. We inherit that sin and the punishment of death from our first parents. There is certainly a truth here. We human beings long for eternal life. The necessity of death seems like a punishment. It is a curse on our nature.

We need to remember, however, that Jesus died. He did not die because he had sinned. Original sin did not touch him. In all things but sin he was like us. We Christians profess that, when the Word became flesh, God chose our human nature to be God's own nature. Death is a part of our nature. By accepting death, Jesus showed the compatibility between humanity and divinity. When Jesus died, we do not say that God died. No, we say that his human nature, the nature that condemned him to death, was one with God's own nature. Death is more than a punishment for original sin. Death is the transition to eternal life.

The death of Jesus is relevant to our understanding of Mary. Jesus did not die because he had to suffer the consequences of the Fall. He died as an example of perfect obedience to his heavenly Father. Like Jesus, Mary said yes to God. We need not say that Mary escaped death,

as if death was incompatible with her Immaculate Conception. We rightly say that Mary died, faithful to the end. Her Assumption into heaven exemplifies the resurrection of the dead. Mary was the first of the redeemed. She was the first to experience the resurrection promised to all the faithful at the end of time.

Conclusion

This evening we have asked, “What Does Mary Teach about the Resurrection of the Dead?” Without reflecting we might have answered, “Mary teaches nothing about the resurrection of the dead because she never died – she was assumed body and soul into heaven.” But we have seen that, between Pope Pius XII’s definition of the Assumption in 1950 and *Lumen gentium* in 1965, there was a shift in the Catholic understanding of Mary. The shift was biblical and eschatological. Mary came to be seen less as the heavenly queen who mediated all graces and who served as co-redeemer. She came to be understood more in biblical terms as the historical person portrayed in the Bible – as a Jewish woman, the spouse of Joseph, and the mother of Jesus. Vatican II also presented her in eschatological terms as a sign of hope. She provides hope that God, who raised her up at the end of her life, will raise us up as well. She is the image of the Church, the image of us as we are to be perfected.

Much of these insights came to me, not as a child, but as an adult. I married in 1978 and became the father of three sons. My wife was born on December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Her mother was born on August 15, the feast of the Assumption. As I reflect on my wife as the mother of our three children, I understand better the particularity of motherhood. I understand better how a mother must say yes to the new life within her.

That helped me to understand Mary in a new way. She said yes to what God asked. At the end of her life, God raised her up, just as we hope God will raise up all creation at the final judgment. Mary is the first of the redeemed, which includes every one of us. Undoubtedly, we will die, but that death is not merely the punishment for original sin. It is the gateway to eternal life.