

Why do Catholics Believe Mary Was Assumed Bodily Into Heaven?

By Graham Osborne

In this month of May, dedicated to the Blessed Mother, it is fitting that we focus on the great crowning jewel to God's work in Mary's life – her entrance into eternal life in God's presence – the ultimate goal of every single Christian.

But the Catholic Church doesn't hold that Mary is simply another soul in the presence of God. It teaches that she was especially privileged and taken up by God bodily into heaven. Pope Pius XII defined the Dogma of the Assumption in 1950, stating: "The Immaculate Mother of God, the ever-virgin Mary, having *completed the course of her earthly life*, was assumed body and soul into heaven." Notice that the Church has not specifically declared whether Mary died or not, for various theological reasons, but simply states: "at the end of her earthly life".

Now some object to the late date of this dogma, claiming that the Catholic Church is inventing new doctrines, but they misunderstand what a dogmatic definition is. First off, the church teaches that public Revelation [the teaching Jesus intended to leave to the Church] ended with death of the last Apostle [cf. Jude 1], and that it has no authority to teach new doctrines, but to only proclaim and more deeply understand that which was left to it by Jesus Himself.

When the Church dogmatically defines something it is usually because a particular teaching has been challenged or questioned, and the faithful are in need of clarification. The date attached to a particular definition has nothing to do with when it was first believed, but reflects that time in history when the definition was needed, and then consequently officially ["dogmatically"] defined. There are many doctrines of the Church that have been handed down by Jesus and the Apostles that have never been "officially"/dogmatically defined, simply because, to date, there has been no need to do so [and recall that, simply put, the difference between a doctrine and a dogma is that, doctrines are all the teachings that Jesus and the Apostles left to the Church, and dogmas are simply those doctrines which get officially and infallibly defined by the Church].

For example, there were several dogmatic definitions made in the 300's and 400's regarding the divinity of Jesus and various teachings about the Trinity and the Holy Spirit. Dates of these dogmatic definitions do not reflect when the Church started to believe these particular teachings, but reflect a time in history when there was much confusion in these particular areas, and the Holy Spirit led the Church to clearly define a specific teaching to help the faithful.

But there is a fascinating story behind the date of this declaration, and a remarkable testimony to the universal working of the Holy Spirit in guiding *all* the faithful. The Church had just declared the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception [which forms much of the theological understanding for the Dogma of the Assumption as well] when millions of

requests started pouring in from bishops, priests, religious and laity around the world, asking for the Church to dogmatically define Mary's Assumption as well.

Pope Pius XII sent a letter to all the bishops of the world asking them if they felt the teaching should be proposed as a dogma and whether the people desired it. Out of the 1232 bishops asked, an incredible 1210 answered "yes" to *both* questions. Such a unanimous response to a doctrinal question was virtually unheard of in the history of the church, and is also a strong testimony to the *sensus fidelium*, a sort of spiritual instinct present in the Church from the time of the Apostles that aids individual believers and the Church as a whole in discerning the truths of the Faith left to it by Jesus.

It differs from a democratic decision, in which people might vote on what they think or feel is right, because it represents the work of the Holy Spirit actively guiding believers towards a truth that exists independent of their own human thinking or opinions. And certainly, while it is a sense that must be ultimately confirmed by the Magisterium [the teaching office of the Church composed of the Pope, and all those Bishops teaching in union with him, protected by the charism, or gift of the Holy Spirit, of infallibility], it is a very real and spiritual aid to the faith of believers.

But let us take a closer look at this teaching of the Church and examine some of the further evidence for it, as well as objections. If we examine this teaching in light of the Ten Commandments, we see that it is perfectly fitting. The 4th Commandment exhorts us to honor our Mother and Father. Jesus, being God, keeps the Commandments perfectly, honoring His mother perfectly by not allowing her body to taste the corruption of the grave, but instead, bringing her directly into the joy of His presence. What else would a good Son do?

But do we specifically see Scriptural precedence and evidence for a bodily assumption into Heaven in Sacred Scripture? Absolutely! In 2 Kings 2:11, we see the great prophet, Elijah, being taken "up to heaven in a whirlwind". Similarly, in Genesis 5:24 we read that "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him". Centuries later, Hebrews 11:5 fills in the details for us, confirming that, "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; And he was not found, **because God had taken him**. Now before he was taken, he was attested as having pleased God". Now who has pleased God more than Blessed Mother?!

In Revelation 11:3-13, we read the dramatic testimony of God commissioning His "two witnesses" to go out and prophesy to the people. It then foretells that they will be killed in battle with "the beast", and "their corpses will lie in the main street of the great city". Then they will hear "a loud voice from heaven say to them, 'Come up here.' So they went up to heaven in a cloud as their enemies looked on." Again, a promise of a bodily assumption into Heaven.

And lastly, in Matthew 27:52-53, as Jesus is dying on the cross, we read that "the tombs also were opened, and many *bodies* of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and

coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many."

Equally interesting is the fact that, while Mary is the greatest of all the saints, no one knows where her body or bones are. This is very unusual, as from the very first decades of the Church, saints' graves, bones and relics were highly sought after, guarded and honored/venerated by the various Christian cities and communities of the time. For example, according to various biographies on those martyred in the Coliseum, their bones [often all that was left] were quickly collected, preserved and honored. There is deafening silence with regard to the location of Mary's remains. No city or church claims them, but there is testimony to two possible locations of an empty tomb, one in Ephesus [St John the Apostle's city] and one in Jerusalem.

Another interesting irony lies in the fact that some Protestant denominations that deny the Assumption of Mary as un-Biblical then insist that there will be a bodily "rapture" of believers into Heaven at some point in the future. Basing this teaching in large part on 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, "the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air", they give this verse their own un-Scriptural twist. They claim that this verse means that Jesus will secretly return to earth and take all believers bodily into Heaven with Him. Those "left behind" would then have to endure a period of tribulation, before Jesus came yet again. Some then teach that Jesus would institute a thousand year reign after this, and then there would be yet another "coming" at the end of that.

But either way, this idea of Jesus taking believers bodily into Heaven is essentially what the Catholic Church is claiming Jesus did for Mary in the Assumption, but He did it *only* for Mary at this point [and the other Scriptural exceptions noted above], in light of her preeminent role as Jesus' mother. This straightforward interpretation also dispenses with the need for multiple un-Scriptural comings of Jesus as well.

In fact a bodily resurrection is what the Church and Scripture teaches is ultimately promised for all of us. Jesus will come one final time at the end of the age to judge both the living and the dead, and then bring those in His friendship, dead and alive, with Him to Heaven. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 is simply a description of this final coming, and not some veiled promise of a "pre-tribulation rapture", and the beginning of a series of multiple comings of Jesus. Such a concept was absolutely foreign to Christian teaching in the first 1800 years of the Church.

But one of the main Scriptural objections to this doctrine that sometimes gets raised comes from **John 3:13** where Jesus says, "No one has ascended up to heaven, but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man." Some reason that if "no one" has ascended into heaven, that would include the Blessed Virgin Mary. But this highlights a key point in this teaching. Mary did not **ascend** into Heaven **on her own power** like Jesus did. She was taken up bodily – assumed – by God Himself!

So while there is no question that the Bible gives ample Scriptural precedence for people being taken bodily into Heaven, perhaps the most powerful testimony to Mary's bodily assumption comes from Revelation 11 and 12. Here, we literally have a description of the Blessed Mother *in Heaven!*

In Rev 11:19 to 12:6 we read: "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of His covenant could be seen in the temple... A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars... She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and His throne."

The quote begins with the Ark of the Covenant being seen in Heaven. Throughout the Bible, the Old Testament is constantly foreshadowing the New, and this is no exception. The Ark of the Old Covenant carried the Word of God written in stone [the 10 Commandments], but this would prefigure the Ark of the New Covenant that would carry the Word of God *made flesh* – Jesus! And the Ark that carried Him was of course Mary. In fact one of her premier titles from the Early Church Fathers/writers was the "Ark of the New Covenant"!

So after describing the Ark seen in Heaven, and reflecting on the fact that Mary is essentially the "New Testament" ark, the quote continues and immediately describes a woman "in the sky", cosmically clothed and crowned, who then gives birth to a Son. That Son is unquestionably Jesus, and so the woman *must* be Mary. So we essentially have a heavenly description of the Blessed Mother in Heaven!

Now some might argue that the Book of Revelation is a very symbolic book in many places, and this is true. Some suggest that the woman is a figure of the Church, and others that she represents Old Testament Israel. And both of these symbolic representations are probably true.

But every Biblical scholar will tell you that the first or primary sense of Sacred Scripture is always the literary sense, unless it is clearly nonsensical or obviously purely symbolic. Can Scripture have both a literal and symbolic understanding for particular text? Absolutely, and it often does. But the literal sense is the primary sense.

To give further evidence towards this interpretation, if we look at the four primary characters in this chapter in context, three of them are actual persons: Jesus, the Archangel Michael and the devil. It would make perfect contextual sense for the fourth person, the "woman", to be an actual person as well, rather than a purely symbolic representation. And not only that, but in other places in Scripture where saints are described in Heaven they are often specifically described as disembodied "souls" [Rev 6:9] or "spirits" [Heb 12:23]. But the "woman" of Revelation 12 clearly has a body, with both a head and feet.

The final beautiful consideration here comes from Psalm 132:8, which prophetically describes the ascension of Jesus into heaven along with the "ark" that He has sanctified,

hundreds of years in advance of these events: "*Arise, O Lord, into your resting place: you and the ark which you have sanctified.*" May we all say with the Blessed Mother, let this great work of God also "be done to *me* according to your will." Allelujah!