

From The Pastor

August 15th signals the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary. As such, it takes the place of the twentieth Sunday of Ordinary time. The belief that Mary was assumed into heaven, body and soul, at her earthly passing comes very early in the Church. There is a written record, and art that depicts Mary's Assumption as early as the fifth century. It was not until November 1, 1950 that Pope Pius XII pronounced the Assumption as formal dogma.

I found it quite interesting when I recently read that there is some evidence and broad support to suggest that Mary lived for many years in the city of Ephesus after the Ascension. Because of the social, political, and religious tensions following Pentecost and the growth of what was then known as the 'New Way', John the beloved disciple is thought to have taken Mary to the city of Ephesus, and perhaps Mary Magdalene. Ephesus was one of the premier Roman cities of the time, not only with running water to much of the city, but street lights along the city square.

How long Mary lived is not known, nor are there any details about her death. Our belief in the Assumption of Mary is purely one of faith. As the sinless one of God, who was the Mother of our Savior, there is no reason to think that Mary would not have been assumed into heaven. Our theology says that death and corruption is a consequence of sin. Mary, free from sin from her conception, would then be freed from the normal human corruption of the body after death.

More than any of these particular details we are much more interested in our faith stance with Mary as the Mother of our Savior. The significance of Mary is all that she represents and leads us to Jesus, Son of God and Savior. This was the single focus and attention of Mary's life. All that Mary did, she did for God and for all of us. Her life points us to Jesus.

With no scriptural references to the Assumption we must depend on the familiar story of the Visitation, and Mary's proclamation of praise, the Magnificat. The story of the Incarnation, God born in human flesh through the Virgin Mary, signals God's desire to share our company and show us the way to our true home with the Father. In the power of the Holy Spirit, God travels from the heavens to the womb of Mary, who in turn travels into the hill country of Judah to greet her relative Elizabeth. A pattern is set; God communicates the divine self to us (in this case through Mary), and we reveal the presence of God to one another (Mary to Elizabeth).

As Mary hears and accepts the invitation from the angel Gabriel, her life is forever changed. To hear or to listen in scripture means to obey, or to act. As Mary hears and receives the Word of God into her womb, her life is set in a course of action to fulfill God's will. She becomes the first disciple and proclaimer of the Word Made Flesh.

There are many reasons for Mary to visit and accompany Elizabeth. Though trusting in faith, Mary is still a very young woman who has never before been pregnant. The same is true of Elizabeth. Though not so young Elizabeth is new at childbirth, and like Mary, at least curious about God's action. God blesses the two women with each other to walk this path of faith, and to confirm their experience of God's presence within. They teach each other how to be faithful, trusting servants of God.

Upon Mary's greeting, the child in the womb of Elizabeth leaps for joy. God the Holy Spirit again stirs and confirms the faith of both women. This 'leaping in the womb' is a traditional sign of God's intervention into our world. Through the surrendering faith of Mary and the supportive role of Elizabeth, God advances his plan for the salvation of the world.

Do our hearts similarly leap for joy when we see and perceive God's action on our behalf? These are not just biblical realities. The hearts of God's people are to be open and ready today to hear God's word in faith and joy, responding with ready attention. For us too, our hearing of God's word, however it comes, calls for a response, some action on our part that acknowledges God's blessing and call.

We might be inclined, like Elizabeth, to say 'but who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me'? Though humbled by her role, Elizabeth does not let herself be paralyzed into non action. She is energized and ready to fulfill her role in bearing John the Baptist, and helping Mary through her early months of pregnancy and spiritual preparation. We all play a role in God's plan. All has not yet been accomplished. God continues to need us as instruments to reveal and inspire each other in faith. We are all companions on a journey to the Lord. We, like Mary and Elizabeth, need spiritual companions along the way to direct, confirm, and inspire us to act on what we hear from the Lord.

Mary's ancient hymn of praise can find an echo in our hearts as well.

Does your soul proclaim the greatness of the Lord? Does your spirit rejoice in God your Savior? If not, it could. Ask the Holy Spirit to awaken you with praise and thanksgiving to the awareness of God within you. You too are honored, and praised, and favored by our God.

Father John Esper