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THE FEAST OF
THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
Ecclesial Discipleship and Redemption

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
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July 7, 2006

THE FEAST OF
THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
Ecclesial Discipleship and Redemption

"Through free divine election and unmerited grace a creature was chosen to be associated in the work of redemption."¹ That creature was Mary, chosen to bear the Son of God, nurture Him and become His first disciple, following Him to His death on Calvary. Considered the pre-eminent disciple by the Catholic Church, Mary is honored for her life of faith and service to the will of the Father. The Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary celebrates Mary's key role in God's plan of salvation, her discipleship, and her ultimate Assumption into heaven to be with her Son.

The topic of Mary, and the end of her life, was virtually non-existent in the early Church. Small references regarding the end of Mary's life emerged in the fourth century, focusing on the belief that Mary was with God in heaven, body and soul, though disagreements surrounded the nature of her Dormition. Apocryphal stories, which surfaced in the fifth century, gave varied accounts of Mary's Dormition and Assumption, and furthered the debate over what truly happened at the end of Mary's life.

Historically, Mary's Assumption was not always the focus for this particular feast. The first feast dedicated to Mary originated in the East in the fifth century as the Feast of Mary *Theotokos* (Mother of God, literally, "God-Bearer"), and then evolved into a commemoration of the Dormition, or "Falling Asleep", of Mary. The Western Church adopted the feast late in the seventh century. By the eighth century it shifted the focus to the

¹ Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., "The Marian Liturgical Tradition," in *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary – Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, eds. H. George Anderson, et. al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 178.

Assumption of Mary, celebrating Mary's reward of eternal life, rather than her death. This shift proved to be a giant step doctrinally, redirecting the focus of this feast in the Western Church, which has lasted through the present century.

The Feast of the Assumption of Mary is not just a celebration of Mary's Assumption, however. Vatican II developed a more ecclesial, inclusive vision to this feast. Although the Assumption bears Mary's name and is considered a Marian feast in the liturgical calendar, it is also a celebration of all disciples of Christ. Chapter Eight of *Lumen Gentium* stresses this ecclesial vision and the relationship between Mary and the Church. Mary, inseparable from Christ, is also inseparable from the Church. And therefore, the Church is inseparable from Christ. This intertwining relationship demonstrates that the reward of eternal life given to Mary is the destiny of all Christians; Christ's death and resurrection guarantees salvation for all of His followers. We follow in Mary's footsteps of discipleship with the hope of His promise of resurrection. Though most people are not expected to sit down and read Church documents, the faithful are expected to attend Mass, and through the liturgy become educated on Church doctrine. Therefore, the reform of the liturgy after Vatican II made a point of choosing readings for the liturgy that concentrated on this theme. Though many mainstream Catholics still perceive that the focus of this feast is exclusively Marian, the readings say otherwise: All disciples are included.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate Vatican II's shift to an ecclesial understanding of redemption in the Feast of the Assumption through the readings and prayers for both the Vigil and Day liturgies. Vatican II's inclusive vision regarding Mary and her Assumption has also impacted ecumenical relations. Renewed interest in common doctrine

and the possibility for future reconciliation have sparked continuing conversations between Catholics and Lutherans in particular.

The paper begins with some historical background. The focus of the Feast of the Assumption of Mary has evolved over the centuries, proving that faith is never stagnant. Redefining our core beliefs helps shape us as a People of God and lead us to our ultimate goal: eternal life with God.

The second section of this paper delves into the liturgical aspect of the Assumption of Mary as impacted by Vatican II. The readings in the revised liturgy focus more intently on the ecclesial vision of redemption for all disciples.

Finally, I will explore the influence of Vatican II on ecumenical relations. Following the definition of Mary's Assumption in 1950, ecumenical relations were significantly strained. Vatican II's vision of Mary and the Feast of the Assumption has made a noticeable impact on ecumenism. Though this topic is among several requiring reconciliation for full communion among the denominations, this idea of inclusiveness has opened doors for greater understanding.

Historical Background

Traditions regarding Mary's Dormition and Assumption had tenuous beginnings. The topic is non-existent in Scripture and absent from early theological discourse, much of which focused on venerating the apostles and martyrs.² This oversight, acknowledged in the fourth century, began the development of this feast, through centuries of conjecture, conflict, and redefinition. Though the focus finally settled on Mary's Assumption, Vatican II pushed one step further in its interpretation and the significance of Mary for today's Christians.

² Adolf Adam, The Liturgical Year (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 207.

A few references to the belief that Mary was in Heaven with God, in both body and soul, began emerging in the fourth century. Most did not question this final outcome for Mary; however, disagreements did surround the actual events of Mary's Dormition.³ Silence on the topic of Mary and the end of her life by the Pre-Nicene Fathers, and the current disagreements, raised concern for Epiphanius of Salamis. After extensive research with his connections in Palestine, he still was unable to uncover an authorized tradition of Mary's final days.⁴

The growing discussions ignited a liturgical cult of Mary in fifth-century Jerusalem. This Feast of Mary *Theotokos* on August 15 began some years before the Council of Ephesus (431) and was celebrated in Kathisma, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the place where, according to tradition, Mary paused to rest before going on to Bethlehem.⁵ According to the Jerusalem lectionary, this feast was general in its theme, but soon evolved into a commemoration of the *Natale* of Mary (birthday, i.e., death – Greek: *koimesis*; Latin: *dormitio* – falling asleep). Transferring to Gethsemane toward the end of the fifth century, and the basilica where people began to venerate the supposed tomb of the Virgin, the feast was soon called the Dormition of the Mother of God.⁶

The end of the fifth century also marked the emergence of a number of diverse narratives that soon circulated into mainstream Christianity. There are significant points of difference among these stories of the *Transitus Mariae* (*The Passage of Mary*, Syrian in

³ David C. Braine, "The Place of the Virgin Mary in Dogmatics," in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 37 (August 9, 1984): 154.

⁴ Stephen Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Assumption and Dormition* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2002), 10-11.

⁵ McDonnell, 178; Irenee Henri Dalmais, Pierre Jounel, Aime Georges Martimort, *The Church at Prayer, Volume IV, The Liturgy and Time*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 131.

⁶ Dalmais, 131.

origin), which described the end of Mary's life.⁷ Though these fanciful accounts of Mary's death continued to be written through the end of the ninth century, Shoemaker's research shows these narratives most likely existed much earlier (second century) due to their dependence on Greek texts that were in circulation no later than the early fifth century.⁸ The apocryphal writings were condemned by Pope Gelasius (492-96), and later scorned by many Roman Catholic theologians. However, the impact of these stories cannot be denied. Despite the discrepancies in the narratives and exclusion of this topic from the Scriptures, it is apparent that the early Christians professed a belief that Mary was taken up to Heaven. These stories conveyed that conviction and ultimately influenced the emergence of liturgical feasts commemorating Mary's Dormition and Assumption.⁹

By the end of the sixth century the Eastern Churches had liturgies that celebrated Mary's Dormition and Assumption. The process was much slower in the Western Church, however. It was not until the pontificate of Sergius I (687-701) that liturgical celebrations pertaining to Mary developed, borrowing them from Byzantium.¹⁰ The *Liber Pontificalis* maintained the Greek name "Dormition" for the August 15 feast, although the Gregorian Sacramentary of Pope Adrian I (772-95) entitled the feast "Assumption of Holy Mary."¹¹ Within this century a doctrinal shift took place. The Western Church chose to celebrate Mary's Assumption rather than her Dormition.¹² Though by the eighth century the Eastern Church universally accepted the belief that Mary was taken up to heaven body and soul at or after her death, consensus in the West was more gradual, as many theologians had

⁷ Shoemaker, 76-77.

⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁹ George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹¹ Adam, 216; Tavard, 26.

¹² Tavard, 92.

reservations surrounding the question of Mary's death.¹³ In choosing to omit this area of debate in their celebrations, the Roman Church catapulted the West into a Paschal Mystery focus for this feast, rather than dwelling on Mary's death.

The heart of the Marian debate of the sixteenth-century Reformers focused on Mary's role in God's plan of salvation, not specifically her Assumption. Luther supported many traditional Marian doctrines and viewed Mary as the example of a true Christian.¹⁴ He, among others, accepted the belief that Mary was in Heaven since the Scriptures infer that all saints live with God. In his lecture on the Assumption of Mary from 15 August 1522, Luther explained that the existence and life of Mary in Heaven, like one of the saints, was not to be doubted. Though one could not conclude from the Gospels how Mary was in heaven, it was enough to know that she lived with Christ:

So erklärt er im "Sermon von der Himmelfahrt Mariä vom 15. August 1522", dass an der Existenz und dem Leben Marias im Himmel wie an dem der Heiligen nicht zu zweifeln sei. Wörtlich führt er aus: "Man kann aus diesem Evangelium (gemeint ist die Perikope Lk 10, 38-42) nicht schliessen, wie Maria im Himmel sei, und es ist auch nicht nötig, dass wir Alles aussagen können, wie es mit den Heiligen im Himmel zugehe. Es genügt zu wissen, dass sie in Christus leben."¹⁵

As the Roman Church reiterated Mary's crucial role in God's plan of salvation, Luther, as well as other reformers, argued that the Roman Church was elevating Mary to a status equal to Christ. By 1544 Luther called the Feast of the Assumption an act of idolatry, papal, and without foundation in the Scriptures:

¹³ Tavard, 93.

¹⁴ Ibid., 111-12.

¹⁵ Thus he explains in the "Sermon of the Ascension of Mary from 15 August 1522" that is not to be doubted the existence and the life of Mary in Heaven like of the saints. Literally he explains: "One has been able from this Gospel (the pericope Lk 10: 38-42) not concluded how Mary is in Heaven, and it is also not necessary that we can state everything as it is with the saints in Heaven. It is enough to know that they live in Christ." Leo Scheffczyk, "Die oekumenische Problematik bezüglich des Assumpta-Dogmas," in Divergenzen in der Mariologie-zur oekumenischen Diskussion um die Mutter Jesu, ed. Heinrich Petri (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1989), 59, translation mine.

"Darum können wir uns seiner Himmelfahrt trösten und wissen, dass wir ihrer dazu geniessen werden, dass wir auch in den Himmel kommen, hier aber auf Erden von ihm erhöret werden sollen in allem, was wir in seinem Namen bitten. Darum ist es ein herrliches, hohes und tröstliches Fest, die Himmelfahrt Christi, dessen die Jungfrau Maria ebenso sehr genossen hat wie wir. Wir aber, obschon sie gen Himmel gefahren ist, können ihrer Himmelfahrt nicht geniessen; wir sollen sie deshalb nicht anrufen noch uns ihrer Fürbitte trösten, wie der Papst gelehret und also unseres lieben Herrn Christi Himmelfahrt geschändet und verunehret hat, dass er die Mutter in allem dem Sohn hat gleich machen wollen."

In diesen wenigen, knappen Aussagen kommt der grundsätzliche Vorbehalt des reformatorischen Denkens gegenüber der Assumptio zum Vorschein, der seine Prägestärke auch in der Folgezeit behalten sollte: die mangelnde Schriftbegründung dieser Wahrheit, ihr angeblicher Zug zur Gleichstellung Marias mit Christus und das eifersüchtige Beharren auf Christus als dem einzigen Fürsprecher beim Vater. Sie gelten auch für Zwingli, der zwar den Glauben bezeugt, dass Maria "von Gott erhöht sei über alle Geschöpfe der seligen Menschen oder Engel," der aber auch die von Luther gelegentlich noch zugelassene Anrufung Marias ablehnt.

...der schliesslich in einer Predigt vom Jahre 1544 ausdrücklich Abgelehnt wird: "Das Fest von der Himmelfahrt Mariä ist durchaus päpstlich, d.h. voll Abgötterei und ohne Begründung durch die Schrift eingesetzt."¹⁶

Luther believed that instead of celebrating Mary's Assumption the focus should be on Christ's Ascension, since it was the Ascension that allowed her Assumption.¹⁷ Unable to find

¹⁶ This is why we can console ourselves to His Ascension and know that we will enjoy theirs to the fact that we also come to the sky, here, however, on earth of Him hear should become in all what we ask in His name. This is why it is a marvelous, high and cheering celebration, the Ascension of Christ which Virgin Mary has enjoyed also very much like us. We, however, although she has gone Heavenward, cannot enjoy her Ascension; we should not call them, therefore still comfort us of her intercession how the pope has violated and dishonorably taught Ascension Day and of our dear man, by the fact that he wanted to equalize the mother in all to the Son.

In this to few, brief statements the basic reservation of the Reformation thinking appears towards the Assumption which should keep his mint strength also in the future: the lacking written grounds of this truth, her supposed characteristic to the equalization of Mary with Christ and jealous persisting on Christ as the only advocate with the Father. They also count to Zwingli which testifies, indeed, the belief that Mary is raised "by God about all creatures of the blessed people or angels" who rejects now and then still admitted invocation of Mary, however, also from Luther.

Finally, in a sermon of 1544: "The celebration of the Ascension of Mary is absolutely papal, fully idolatrous and without grounds by the writing." Scheffczyk, 59-61, translation mine.

common ground on this topic by the end of the sixteenth century, virtually all references to Mary were omitted from the Reformed "Confessions," while the Feast and doctrine became accepted as part of the Church's teaching in Catholic countries.¹⁸

The twentieth century brought many theological changes. Pope Pius XII promulgated *Munificentissimus Deus* (the doctrine of Mary's Assumption) on 1 November 1950.¹⁹ Wanting to recognize Mary's role in the drama of salvation, and to underscore how Jesus Christ effected a change for all of the human race, Pius XII chose the Feast of All Saints as the day to announce this dogma. The Lord's promise was not to Mary alone, but to all of his followers: "Where I am, there you will be also" (John 14:3).²⁰ Though the document stresses that the Assumption was found in the Scriptures, it does not identify where, and, according to Tavad, it relied more heavily on tradition than Scripture.²¹ Also surprising was the exclusion of the topic of Mary's death:

We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.²²

Mary's death was agreed upon by the East and West, though not universally accepted.

Mary's death also played an integral role in understanding the Dormition (*Koimesis*) in Eastern theology. At this time, the position that Mary would be exempt from death, a human condition that even Jesus was subject to, was viewed as theologically unsound by many.²³

The initiative of the pope to declare this dogma, along with excluding any mention of Mary's

¹⁷ Tavad, 112.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁰ John Macquarrie, *Mary for All Christians*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 2001), 82, 86.

²¹ Tavad, 198.

²² *Ibid.*, 199.

²³ *Ibid.*, 199. There are a few authors who speculate Mary was taken up to heaven without dying; see 200.

death, created a disturbance not only among Catholic theologians, but between denominations. Mary was, once again, a divisive topic.

A fresh voice came with Vatican II. Echoing the firm bond between Mary and the Church, Vatican II declared Mary a model of faith and charity. Reaffirming Luther's words four hundred years earlier, Mary's solidarity with Christ is such that His Ascension implies her Assumption. Therefore, "it is only natural to expect that Mary would be among the company of saints, among the living and not the dead, with God in body and soul, in company with her Son."²⁴ She is inseparable from Christ on one side, and inseparable from the Church on the other, indicating that the Church, too, is inseparable from Christ. Mary's Assumption, therefore, implies our assumption.²⁵ Emphasizing this perspective, the dogma of the Assumption becomes much broader than just personal piety towards Mary. It becomes a dogma about the whole Church.²⁶ The Assumption of Mary is both a moment in history and a continuing process, complete only when all are fully united with Christ.²⁷

Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (21 November 1964) issued at Vatican II, contains a chapter devoted to the Blessed Virgin.²⁸ After the criticism surrounding *Munificentissimus Deus*, it is apparent that the Council chose its wording carefully, supporting its views with evidence from the Old and New Testaments, as well as the tradition. Highlighting Mary's role in God's plan of salvation, Mary is foreshadowed in the Old Testament in the promise of victory over the serpent given to Adam and Eve when they fell into sin (n. 55). Just as a woman had a share in bringing about death, so the Father

²⁴ Braine, 155.

²⁵ Macquarrie, 90-91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁸ Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., "Lumen Gentium," in *Vatican Council II - The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, (New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1992), Chapter 8, Section II, 415.

willed that a woman should also contribute to life. Committing herself completely to the service of the Father, Mary worked with and under her Son to bring about redemption for all of humankind (n. 56). Freely cooperating through her faith and obedience, Mary surpasses all creatures, yet, she too stands with all the faithful in need of salvation (n. 53).²⁹ Though she is regarded as the pre-eminent disciple and exemplar of faith, she is a member of the Church, in need of the redemption that only Christ can give. In Mary we see the Church in all its perfection. The faithful, though, must continuously strive to overcome sin and increase in holiness (n. 65). Mary is a model for the People of God, demonstrating a motherly love that all who participate in the apostolic mission of the Church should imitate (n. 65). She is the image and beginning of the Church, and a sign of hope and comfort to the Pilgrim People of God (n. 68). In addition to Mary's role as model to the faithful, the Council also stressed the role of the Church as mother to the faithful. A renewed interest in ecclesiology redirected the focus beyond Mary, incorporating the Church in God's plan of salvation. Baptism, the Scriptures and preaching also bring life to the faithful (n. 63).³⁰ The faithful bring life to the faithful.

Theological record shows a long and bumpy progression of thought regarding the events surrounding the end of Mary's life and her Dormition. The evolution of this feast into one focusing on Mary's Assumption proved to be a dramatic theological shift, influencing the interpretation of Mary and her Assumption through the twentieth century. In an attempt to heal wounds spurred by the proclamation of the dogma of Mary's Assumption in 1950, Vatican II published a chapter in *Lumen Gentium* concentrating solely on the Virgin Mary.

²⁹ Adam, 204; Carl J. Peter, "The Saints and Mary in the Eschatology of the Second Vatican Council," in *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary – Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*. eds. H. George Anderson, et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 303.

³⁰ Tavad, 204.

Echoing the voice of Luther so many centuries ago, the Council reiterated Mary's close ties to Christ: His Ascension guarantees her Assumption. Holding Mary in high esteem as the model of faith of charity, we, the disciples of Christ, should strive to follow in her footsteps. Vatican II, though, presses us forward in a broader direction: look at this feast of Mary in an ecclesial light. Yes, Christ's Ascension promised Mary her Assumption. But Christ also promised resurrection to all of his disciples. We can celebrate, not only for Mary, but for ourselves. This Feast of Mary's Assumption is for all the faithful.

The Feast of the Assumption – Vigil and Day Liturgies

This ecclesial vision of Vatican II emphasized the importance of the Paschal Mystery in an ecclesial context, especially with the Feast of the Assumption. Promulgated in 1964 by Pope Paul VI, the new liturgical calendar modified the list of feasts and clearly integrated them into the mystery of Christ's salvation, the core of all Christian faith and worship.³¹ Though every liturgy focuses on the Paschal Mystery, the Assumption manifests this on a variety of levels. Preeminent among the Marian feasts, the Assumption is also one of the most humanistic feasts in the liturgical calendar.³² This is the feast of Mary's "full and blessed destiny, the glorification of her immaculate soul and virginal body, her perfect configuration to the risen Christ" (*Marialis cultus*, n. 6) and "sign of fulfillment of the common Christian hope."³³ The Paschal Mystery is the essence of this feast, a celebration of

³¹ Mary Misrahi, trans., *Days of the Lord – The Liturgical Year, Vol. 7, Solemnities and Feasts* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 202.

³² Macquarrie, 92.

³³ Eamon R. Carroll, "Mary in the Western Liturgy: *Marialis cultus*," in *Communio* vol. 7 (Summer 1980): 145; paraphrasing the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 17 May 1979; Pope Paul VI, *Marialis cultus* (21 November 1975).

the glorified Mary. But more importantly for all Christians, it is a celebration of our promised redemption.

Vatican II's doctrine on Mary is well supported in the current Missal and Lectionary.³⁴ The readings and prayers selected for the Assumption liturgies are steeped in discipleship and resurrection imagery. While most of the selections display these themes readily, a few challenge the reader to further contemplation.

These challenges come early on. Beginning with the readings for the Vigil celebration on August 14, the faithful first hear from 1 Chronicles and Psalm 132,³⁵ the two which can be the most difficult to decipher. The 1 Chronicles story recalls the transfer of the Ark. In describing the scene, the listener finds David assembling Israel to bring the ark of the Lord to the place which had been prepared for it. Musicians are playing, people are rejoicing, and burnt offerings are being offered up to the Lord. David then blesses the people in the name of the Lord. This theme of the ark is rather nebulous in its connection to the Assumption. However, Christians interpret this story in relation to the cult which will be celebrated in the heavenly Jerusalem.³⁶ Looking back at the Patristic writers, Mary, the one who bore the Word of God, was associated with the ark.³⁷ This symbolism of Mary bringing the faithful to the throne of God is an image also extracted from Vatican II³⁸. In following Mary's example of discipleship one will be drawn ever closer to the Lord, and therefore attain the great reward of salvation. Ecumenically speaking, it is also hoped that the more

³⁴ Misrahi, 203.

³⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Lectionary for Sunday Mass (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1999), n. 621.

³⁶ Misrahi, 206.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

ecclesial image of Mary established with Vatican II will aid in furthering dialogue among the denominations.

Psalm 132 follows closely with the Old Testament reading, drawing on the same themes of David, the servant, and the Lord's chosen resting place. A New Testament point of view envisions the Virgin, by following the will of God, becoming the "chosen one" for the dwelling place of the Lord.³⁹ Vatican II praises Mary's faithfulness to God in this psalm.

First Corinthians is immersed in resurrection language; immortality, death is swallowed up, God gives us victory through Jesus Christ. "When that which is mortal clothes itself with immortality..."⁴⁰ one is transformed and conformed to the image of the resurrected Christ.⁴¹ This reading speaks not only of Mary assuming her place in heaven, but is a promise to all disciples.

Mary's discipleship, rather than her position as the Mother of God, is at the heart of the brief gospel from Luke. The reading, also chosen for the Roman liturgy of the sixth century that celebrated the Mother of God, is particularly fitting for this feast. Christ honors his mother for her obedience to the will of the Father:⁴² "...blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it."⁴³ Even more important than Mary's role as the mother of the Son of God was her faithfulness to God. She "bent her will entirely to the will of God (Luke 1:39). This does not mean that she always saw clear what she was to do (Luke 2:50) or just where her submission would take her. But she always conformed her own will to the will of

³⁹ NCCB, Lectionary, n. 621.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Misrahi, 208.

⁴² Ibid., 209.

⁴³ NCCB, Lectionary, n. 621.

God."⁴⁴ This is what Mary's example teaches us: to listen to what God wants for us and trust in the direction He takes us.

The Scriptures chosen for the Feast Day (August 15) are powerful as well. The Book of Revelation casts many images for the listeners. On the surface one can interpret certain meanings from this text that are popular among the faithful. Mary is giving birth to Christ. His life was threatened from the beginning, yet he was destined to rule and defeat the powers of evil. The chosen daughter of God, Mary is protected in a special place prepared for her by God.⁴⁵ Early Patristic writers infrequently identified this apocalyptic woman with Mary. Most often she was identified with the Church itself.⁴⁶ Christ's birth was not only from Mary, but from within each of us, individually and as a whole. The process is long, enduring persecutions and temptations. Simultaneously we see the Church in all its glory and in all its struggles; the glorified Church of the saints and the trials of the faithful still on earth. Yet God is ever present to help the Church against the powers of evil, and for the faithful He has prepared a special place.⁴⁷ Christ's birth in each of us keeps the faith going, century after century. We become disciples and we pass the flame on to the next generation. And when our time on earth spreading His word is completed, we too are called to His side to share eternity.

Psalm 45 has a Marian theme but can also be understood in context of Vatican II. Mary, the queen, takes her place with her Son. Her faithful discipleship brought her many trials to endure: the scandal around her conception, fleeing Herod, as well as others, and ultimately witnessing the excruciating death of her Son at Calvary. However, at her

⁴⁴ Misrahi, 210-11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 215.

⁴⁶ Shoemaker, 13.

⁴⁷ Misrahi, 215.

Assumption she experiences only gladness and joy. The Lord desires us, the Church, to follow Mary's model of discipleship, so that we may attain our place in heaven with Him.⁴⁸

A different pericope from Corinthians is used on this day and focuses on Christ as the "firstfruits," the sampling of the whole.⁴⁹ Christ was offered for the whole of humanity, to suffer and die, but more importantly to rise, and thereby bring salvation to all. God brought to fruition in Christ what is destined for all of us. Christ's resurrection is a pledge of our resurrection. Mary, the first of the disciples, was also predestined to be "holy and spotless." In her perfection she marked the beginning of the Church⁵⁰ and the promised resurrection of the faithful became a reality in Mary.⁵¹

Luke's gospel contains the great *Magnificat* text. Though humble, Mary clearly sees her role in the plan of salvation and responds with this song of praise to God for the wonderful things He has done. Today, in light of her glorious Assumption, the *Magnificat* takes on a special tone.⁵² Blessed and chosen to bear the Savior, today her praises are for the God who raised her up in her lowliness and bestowed on her His promise of everlasting life.

The themes of the Opening Prayers for the Vigil and Day liturgies continue the focus from the readings of the Mass of the Day. The Opening Prayer for the Vigil Mass speaks of the humble Virgin, privileged by God, becoming the mother of the Savior. She is crowned with the glory of heaven. We pray that her prayers "bring us to the salvation of Christ and raise us up to eternal life."⁵³ The Alternate Form expresses the power of the Father in exalting the Virgin and making her the mother of Christ. This woman, "clothed with the

⁴⁸ Carroll, 145-46.

⁴⁹ Misrahi, 216; Offering the "firstfruits" of the harvest was to symbolically offer the whole harvest.

⁵⁰ Dalmais, 149.

⁵¹ Adam, 205.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Sacramentary (The Roman Missal)*, trans. International Commission on English in the Liturgy (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1985), 684.

sun," will "bring Jesus to the waiting world and fill the void of incompleteness."⁵⁴ The Prayers for the Mass of the Day articulate Mary's Assumption, body and soul, into the glory of heaven. Heaven is our final destination, and we pray to follow in her footsteps, reflecting the Lord's holiness, that we may also sing her hymn of praise. The Preface for this Feast incorporates language from the ancient *Veneranda* prayer and echoes the wording of *Lumen Gentium*: Mary is the beginning and model of perfection for the Church.⁵⁵ For this reason she was taken up to heaven before decay could reach her body, and, in her, the pilgrim People of God can find hope and comfort.⁵⁶

Vatican II's vision of discipleship and ecclesial redemption, rather than Mary's personal glory, are ever present throughout the readings and prayers on this feast day. Through the Paschal Mystery, Christ redeemed not only the pre-eminent disciple of the Church, Mary, but all of the faithful disciples who strive to model their lives after the Virgin. One's position in life means nothing. Surrendering one's heart and life to the will of the Father is what puts us on the path to salvation.

Ecumenical Implications

During the twentieth century the Church revived the turmoil of the Reformation and also tried to put it to rest. The topic of Mary is not the exclusive reason for the denominational division, however; Vatican II offered an olive branch in its more ecclesial approach to Mary, her role as disciple in the plan of salvation, and her Assumption. The research gathered demonstrates Vatican II's positive influence on ecumenism.

⁵⁴ NCCB, *The Sacramentary (The Roman Missal)*, 684.

⁵⁵ Dalmais, 150.

⁵⁶ Avery Dulles, S.J., "The Dogma of the Assumption," in *The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary – Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, ed. H. George Anderson, et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 280.

The proclamation of the dogma of Mary's Assumption in 1950 severely obstructed the process of ecumenism. Aside from the fact that a vast majority of the bishops encouraged the pope to declare this definition,⁵⁷ the dogma was not universally accepted. The Orthodox Church was not prepared to admit this dogma and the English Churches refused to acknowledge any doctrine that was not based on Scripture as a condition for redemption. After the proclamation, church leaders and prominent members of the growing ecumenical movement initiated formal protests:⁵⁸

Demnach folgt auch ein Hinweis auf die Inopportunität der Dogmatisierung: "Wir bedauern zutiefst, dass die römisch-katholische Kirche dieses Dogma gewählt hat, um die dogmatischen Unterschiede in der Christenheit zu vermehren und auf diese Weise das wachsende Einvernehmen der Christen zu schädigen."⁵⁹

Gerhard Ebeling's response represented the Lutheran reaction: "This dogma demonstrates the Catholic perception of salvation history which involves Mary as the mystical personification of the Church and 'Mediatrice of all grace'."⁶⁰ The one positive statement came from Protestant author R. Schimmelpfennig soon after 1950: "...dass das neue Dogma, allen negativen Prophezeiungen zum Trotz, im Protestantismus zu einem tieferen Nachdenken über die Marienwahrheit geführt habe."⁶¹

Differing interpretations separate Roman Catholic and Protestant thought regarding Mary's story. Theological statements about Mary, while referring immediately to the person

⁵⁷ Dulles, 280.

⁵⁸ Eric W. Gritsch, "The Views of Luther and Lutheranism on the Veneration of Mary," in The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary – Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII, ed. H. George Anderson, et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 247.

⁵⁹ Therefore, also follows the inopportuneness of the dogma: "We regret profoundly that the Roman Catholic Church has chosen this dogma to increase the dogmatic differences in the Christendom and to damage in this manner the growing agreement of the Christians." Scheffczyk, 63-64, translation mine.

⁶⁰ Gritsch, 248.

⁶¹ "...that the new dogma, to all negative prophecies has led in spite of, in the Protestantism to a deeper reflection about the truth of Mary." Scheffczyk, 67, translation mine.

of Mary, also have a symbolic structure. These statements are also about the Church, the community of disciples, of which Mary is a member.⁶² The Roman Catholic viewpoint is primarily historical: factual information about the person of Mary. Protestants envision these statements as meditative reflections on a life of faith, without any real association to the actual woman.⁶³ Vatican II has pushed the Catholic faithful in that direction. While maintaining that the events pertain to the person of Mary, there is greater focus on the meaning of those events for us, the community of disciples.

Common ground exists. Ecumenically speaking, we do have many shared beliefs: the dependence of all things on God, our common belief in grace, the importance of God's free choice and initiative, the value of prayer, the immediacy with which one can address the Father, the presence of the Lord, and the activity of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ In addition, the Eastern tradition of Mary and her Assumption and the Protestant tradition of the symbolic nature of Mary inspire the hope that she can be an avenue of reconciliation among the Christian traditions.⁶⁵

The Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, published in 1992, highlighted several common areas and gave hope for further discussion.⁶⁶ Reflections from both delegations offered some insights into their discussions. A commonality was discovered in Luther. His high esteem for Mary, evident in his hymns and meditations ("Commentary on the *Magnificat*" and the "Lutheran Confessions")⁶⁷ reminded the commission that, historically, common ground

⁶² Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Symbolic Character of Theological Statements about Mary," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22:2 (Spring, 1985): 313.

⁶³ Johnson, 315.

⁶⁴ Braine, 145.

⁶⁵ Macquarrie, 106; Carroll, 155-56.

⁶⁶ H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess, eds. "Catholic Reflections," "Lutheran Reflections," in *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary – Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

⁶⁷ Anderson, et al., pa 18, 122; pa 1, 125.

existed regarding the topic of Mary. Today, her life of discipleship can be one that all Christians strive to imitate. The Catholic tradition, believing that saints are models of holiness, affirms that to keep company with the saints allows us to be bonded to the millions of faithful around the world and throughout time.⁶⁸ Vatican II teachings, reinforced by statements from Paul VI and John Paul II, have led Lutherans to a clearer understanding of the Catholic position on veneration. Properly honoring Mary and the saints involves the theological principles of the Trinity and ecclesial truths.⁶⁹ Confusion in the use of the terms "venerate" and "adore (adoration)," even by Catholics themselves, furthers the erroneous perception of Catholic veneration of Mary and the saints. We "venerate" Mary and the saints and we "adore" Christ.⁷⁰ Mary and the saints are honored for their lives of discipleship; however, we worship the Trinity. Through discussions, Lutherans have become more aware of the differences in terminology and have a greater understanding for the position of Mary and the saints in Catholic doctrine.

One scenario for reconciliation proposed by the delegations has the Catholic authorities agreeing that members of the Lutheran Churches are free to not profess a belief in the Marian dogmas of 1854 (Immaculate Conception) and 1950 (Assumption). Disagreement on these dogmas is not unimportant, however, and full ecclesial communion would involve agreement on both sides regarding all truths either Church holds to be binding in faith or inseparable from the gospel.⁷¹ The area that seems to have the most potential for making headway is the renewed vision of Vatican II regarding the theme of Mary's discipleship and the inclusive aspect of redemption in the Assumption, as displayed in *Lumen*

⁶⁸ Anderson, et al., pa. 2, 117.

⁶⁹ Anderson, et al., pa. 7, 118.

⁷⁰ "Venerate" – "To regard with respect, reverence, or deference." "Adore" – "1. To worship as divine; 2. To love or revere deeply": Webster's II New College Dictionary (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995), 1224; 15.

⁷¹ Anderson, et al., pa. 20, 123.

Gentium and the liturgy. All Christians can relate to Mary as a model of charity and faithfulness and strive to follow in her footsteps of devotion. The promise of salvation can inspire all denominations toward a life of discipleship. Both Lutherans and Catholics displayed a growing optimism in the ecumenical process and are hopeful of a positive outcome. Whether full ecclesial communion is reached or not, one thing is certain. We are no longer at the same point we were in the sixteenth century, nor in 1950. Positive strides have been accomplished and ecumenical relations can only improve.

Conclusion

Considerable development occurred during the historical unfolding of the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. A faith that once focused on Mary's death gave way to one which celebrated her reward of salvation. This dramatic shift propelled future generations into a renewed faith of life beyond the grave. Overcoming the schism of the Reformation and the ramifications of *Munificentissimus Deus*, Vatican II committed itself to forwarding ecumenical relations through their ecclesial vision of Mary and her Assumption.

Lumen Gentium stresses Mary's important role in the plan of salvation through her desire to be God's servant. Pre-destined to be the mother of God, she was chosen to be the model of faith and charity for all future Christians to imitate. Her life of discipleship is rewarded by her Assumption. In calling all the faithful to hold Mary as a guide for our own lives, Vatican II reminds us that Mary, the pre-eminent disciple, was also a member of the Church, as we are. Christ's promise of salvation was not only to Mary and the apostles, but all disciples. The Scriptures and prayers offered on the Feast of the Assumption beckon all of Christ's disciples to celebrate their reward of salvation on this day. This Feast, once

considered idolatrous and without merit, celebrates more than Mary's glory in heaven. The destiny promised to Mary is also promised to us.

Through this shift in Mariology, Vatican II greatly influenced both Catholic and ecumenical perceptions of Mary, specifically in regard to her Assumption. Once a topic that caused an enormous fracture between the denominations, Mary is seen today as a means of reconciliation. Vatican II has spurred greater understanding ecumenically and provided an impetus for the hope of future ecclesial communion.

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