

CLIFF NOTES

by Fr. Clifford G. Smith

August 15th: The Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

According to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Virgin Mary, "having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." This doctrine was dogmatically and infallibly defined by Pope Pius XII on 1 November 1950 in the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*. In essence this dogma teaches that "for Mary, death, in consequence of her freedom from original sin and from personal sin, was not a consequence of punishment of sin." Since Catholic Theology teaches that human death is a consequence of sin, and under the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception Mary was free from sin from the moment of her conception and throughout her life, she could not be touched by bodily death, although this is not defined dogmatically.

On August 15, 2004, Pope John Paul II quoted from the Gospel of John (14:3) as a scriptural basis for understanding the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, explained that Jesus' statement: "When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also," referred also to the Assumption of Mary. He said that Mary is the pledge of the fulfillment of Christ's promise in that Gospel passage. However, many theologians disagree with this interpretation of Scripture, and believe that Christ was speaking about his preparation of Calvary and the crucifixion for the remission of sins. The Roman Catholic Church has most often interpreted chapter 12:5-6 of the *Book of Revelation* as referring to the Assumption: "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 woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God, that there she might be taken care of ..."

Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that Mary died a natural death, that her soul was received by Christ upon death, and that her body was resurrected on the third day after her death and that she was taken up into heaven bodily in anticipation of the general resurrection. Her tomb was found empty on the third day. The Orthodox Church teaches the *Dormition*, or *Falling-Asleep of Mary*, that Mary underwent, as did Jesus, a physical death, but her body, like His, was afterwards raised from the dead and she was taken up into heaven, in her body as well as in her soul. She has passed beyond death and judgment, and lives wholly in the Age to Come.

As a result of recent ecumenical dialogue, the Anglican--Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), said that both churches now see eye-to-eye on the divisions going back to the Protestant Reformation. Prayers directed to Mary, mother of Jesus, are not now the continuing divisive issue it once was, the report said. Only two Catholic dogmas on Mary carry the weight of papal infallibility--that Jesus' mother was born without "the stain of original sin" and that she was "assumed body and soul" into heaven at the end of her life--and those remain an obstacle for some Anglicans.

The joint statement of the Commission, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, said both churches now agree that the Immaculate Conception, proclaimed in 1854, and Mary's Assumption, proclaimed in 1950, are "consonant" with scripture. Neither should be a cause for division between the two bodies, the 2005 statement said.

The two churches have engaged in official dialogue since 1965, and the statement on Mary grew out of a request from leaders of both churches in the year 2000.

The commission's report declared that prayers to the mother of Jesus do not conflict with Christ's unique mediation with God the Father. "We do not consider the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us as communion dividing.... We believe that there is no continuing theological reason for ecclesial division on these matters," said the report. "Asking the saints to pray for us is not to be excluded as unscriptural, though it is not directly taught by the scriptures to be a required element of life in Christ." The statement called Mary "a model of holiness, faith, and obedience for all Christians" and looked to her as "Christ's foremost disciple."

August 15th, the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is a Holy Day of Obligation. All Catholics are obligated to attend Mass.