

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
(Apocalypse 11:19a; 12:1-6a,10ab / Luke 1:39-56)  
15.08.2020

The Collect (that is, the Opening Prayer) of the Vigil Eucharist for the Solemnity we celebrate captures the point I want to emphasise today. It states *the Lord God looking on the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary raised her to the grace of the Assumption. I want to draw attention to the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary* emphasising that the extraordinary privileges accorded to Mary were all gifts of God's grace.

The mystery of *Mary's Glorious Assumption* celebrated today is a privilege accorded to her out of God's benevolence. It is not something that she gained by her merits. Mary's glorification is all due to the work of God's grace in her life; it is not a reward obtained for efforts made.

God's graces are always free gifts; they are always pure fruits of God's love. We know this; we can rhyme off phrases like those I have just employed... and yet, we can be slow to really *take in* and truly believe what I have just said. In a corner of our hearts the notion is inclined to linger that graces have somehow to be merited. We think in terms of big efforts being made to obtain great favours. We struggle to come to grips with pure gratuitousness.

Although the apostle Paul was not thinking specifically of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, when he wrote the following lines in his Second letter to Timothy, his words can be applied to her as much as to anyone who is offered God's free gift of grace. I quote 2 Tim. 1:9: *It is He who saved us and chose us for His holy work not because we deserved it but because that was His plan long before the world began – to show His love and kindness to us through Christ.*

The Gospel passage chosen for today's feast has Mary herself express her understanding that she merited nothing. The Virgin's words explain to us that if anything came into play to impress the Lord it was simply her *lowliness*... her poverty, her humility. What God saw and took into consideration in her was nothing Mary could boast about! The *Magnificat* states that it is because of Mary's lowliness that she was exalted: *He has looked up the lowliness of His servant. He has taken into consideration and graciously blessed His lowly servant girl.*

I wonder if it in these terms that we consider Mary and ourselves: as lowly folk; as poor and needy people; as hungry, indeed starving men and women... people in need of God's mercy. Any greatness we know in our lives is a reflection of the magnificence of God.

Mary *magnified* the Lord. She reflected her Lord as a mirror reflects a person's image.

Whatever greatness is displayed in any of our lives is certainly not our own. It is a manifestation of God's grandeur displayed in and through the weak human beings we are – men and women in whom the Lord's love and splendour are reflected and seen to be at work. The hallmark of any person's greatness will always be their humility.

Saying what I am insisting upon this morning, I am certainly not seeking to denigrate Mary. I am not trying to downplay any other greatly acclaimed Christian disciple for that matter. My objective is to help us situate Mary as she placed herself before the Lord: as God's humble servant. Nothing more. Nothing less. Mary's real greatness is, in fact, her lowly attitude of heart: the fact that she saw herself to be a humble servant. Mary's wonderful *I am* statement, if I can put it that way, was and remains for all eternity: *I am... the handmaid of the Lord.*

What we might think of as *Mary's posture of heart* encourages us to situate ourselves before the Lord with the same way inner disposition: as people whose hearts are humble before God and before others.

The call to humility runs throughout the Sacred Scriptures. I won't attempt to offer an exhaustive supply of proof texts from the Bible to substantiate that claim. I will refer just briefly to a few texts that immediately spring to mind. In chapter 6 of the Old Testament Book of Micah it is made known to Israel, God's Chosen People, that what is awaited from them as *God's Servant People* is that they *walk humbly in the Lord's presence*. New Testament calls inviting Christian disciples to live in humility of heart abound. Peter writes in chapter 5, verse 6, of his First Letter: *Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, so that He will lift you up*. The way to exaltation is through descent in the way of humility: we ascend by descending. This is key to St Benedict's teaching in his *Rule for Monks*, of course. It is the whole movement of decent – presented as the way of ascent – that Benedict speaks of at such length in chapter 7 of our Rule of life. Benedict's teaching therein is based upon Christ's own words. In Luke 14 & Matthew 23 we read how Jesus said: *Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*. In Colossians Paul speaks of the need for *God's chosen people, the holy and dearly loved of God* (all attributes we can associate with Mary – she was *chosen, holy and dearly loved by God*) *to be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience*. Reading those lines, one Gospel scene comes to mind: a text wherein Mary's greatness and influence upon the Lord's own heart are to be evidenced. It is the Cana story found in chapter 2 of John's Gospel. Therein we see a compassionate Mary intervening in favour of a young couple, bidding her son to show kindness to them at a moment when their wedding feast is in peril because of a lack of wine. Mary's compassion and kindness, coupled with her humility, gentleness and patience, are shown to have swayed her Son's heart. Jesus was moved by His mother's request to perform what John's Gospel calls His *first sign*. Christ's intervention is shown to have saved the day. What we see displayed in this story is what St James speaks of when he declares in chapter 4, verse 6, of his Epistle: *The Lord shows favour to the humble*.

Catholic tradition has always emphasised the humility of Mary. In the writings of St Alphonsus of Liguori, in a work entitled *On the Glories of Mary*, we read: *Mary, being the first and most perfect disciple of Jesus Christ in the practice of all virtues, was first also in that of humility, and by it merited to be exalted above all creatures*. St Alphonsus goes on to expound on that aspect of the glory of Mary which is her humility, having recourse to the writings of many great saints and doctors of the Church – among their number a fine number from the Benedictine/Cistercian monastic tradition, men and women who would have been greatly marked by chapter 7 of St Benedict's Rule for Monks '*On Humility*'. St Alphonsus explains how *the first effect of humility of heart is a lowly opinion of ourselves*. He goes on: *Mary had always so humble an opinion of herself, that, as it was revealed to St Matilda, although she saw herself enriched with greater graces than all other creatures, she never preferred herself to anyone*. (Mary preferred Christ to everything and everyone else in her life.) Having drawn upon teachers from the Benedictine/Cistercian tradition to make his point, St Alphonsus goes on to quote teachers coming from other strands of the Church's great spiritual traditions. Among those he quotes is a remarkable Franciscan teacher, St Bernardine of Siena. Alphonsus relays Bernardine's explanatory words about Mary's vision of God and her own self-assessment. I quote: *The Blessed Virgin had always the majesty of God and her own nothingness present to her mind*.

I won't try to work my way through the whole of Alphonsus' insightful text *On the Glories of Mary* with you. All I would say to you is that what comes across again and again is how Alphonsus sees Mary's great glories as all being rooted in her profound humility.

This leads me to claim that Mary's Glorious Assumption is the fruit of her understanding herself to be, and living her life as, God's humble servant. In the same way as Christ's *kenosis* described for us in chapter 2 of Paul's Letter to the Philippians – His *kenosis* being that self-emptying love which led Him to humble Himself. In the same way as His *kenosis* led to Jesus' being *exalted and given the name above every other name*, so too Mary's whole attitude of lowliness of heart and humble service (evidence of her *kenosis*) led to her being exalted, lifted up by God to be with Him in glory for all eternity, through the mystery of her wondrous Assumption.

The call addressed to us as we contemplate Mary in the mystery we celebrate today is a call to *humble ourselves*, so that, in our turn, we may be exalted. We have Christ's word for it: *Whoever humbles him or her self will be exalted*. Ultimately the invitation addressed to us is a call to share in God's own life.

Assumed into heaven, Mary reveals our own destiny to us. The mystery we celebrate reminds us that ever since Christ-Jesus took on our human flesh – God becoming human in the child of Bethlehem, born of Mary, in the man of Nazareth, and in the itinerant preacher of Galilee – the whole of humanity is called to become one with God in His divinity. Our Orthodox brothers and sisters do not shy away from speaking of our ultimate vocation being nothing less than a call to divinisation.

Mary's Glorious Assumption amounts to her having been led to share in the glory of her Son's Glorious Resurrection. To share in the glory of the Risen Christ is the call addressed to you and to me today, no less than it has already been accorded to Blessed Mary.

Amen!