

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – August 15th 2021

A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

The Assumption of Mary

While the Assumption of Mary has been celebrated for over a thousand years, the doctrine of her assumption was officially defined as late as 1950. To mark the occasion, the famous novelist, Graham Greene, who had been received into the Catholic Church shortly before that, was asked to write an article for *Life*, then the best-selling glossy magazine in the world. For a while he wondered what he might write for his likely readers. Then it struck him that this was a celebration of the nobility and sanctity of the human body. This was only five years after World War II when battles, bombings and death camps showed absolute disregard for the human body. At the other extreme he reflected on the false glamourization of the body. Here we are, seventy years later and matters have got worse. There is huge pressure on people, girls especially, to conform to certain models of so-called beauty. The Christian concept of beauty is that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined to reflect the glory of God in the light of the beatific vision.

Mary, Model of the Church

There is an old saying in theology that what God desires of the many, he first expresses in the one. That means that Mary is set up as a headline to copy, just as we learned to write by copying the headline words at the top of the page. When her life on earth was completed, she was taken up to complete her sharing in the Resurrection of her Son. And where she has gone, we hope to follow. “For today the Virgin Mother of God was assumed into heaven as the beginning and image of your Church’s coming to perfection” (Preface of the Mass).

A sign of sure hope and comfort to your pilgrim people

When Jesus hung on the cross he turned to his mother, Mary, and to John, known as the beloved disciple. He said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son.” And to the beloved disciple he said, “Behold your mother”. If he had addressed Mary as mother, it would have referred to her as his own mother, but when he addressed her as woman, it expressed her universal motherhood of all his beloved disciples. In other words, she was given to us as our mother. A mother not only gives birth to her child but continues to be mother in feeding, nursing, caring and responding to every need. The Preface for today’s feast describes her as “a sign of sure hope and comfort to your pilgrim people.”

There are many beautiful titles given to Mary such as “Health of the sick” and “Comforter of the afflicted.” The shrines of Mary are associated with stories of all sorts of healing. A title that has become popular in recent years is “Mary, Untier of Knots”

Mary, Untier of Knots

Back in 1986, Jorge Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis, completed his term as Provincial Leader of the Jesuits in Argentina. It was the period of the dirty war when it was impossible to steer a path that would please everybody. To get away from that stressful situation he was advised to go abroad on Sabbatical to resume his studies. He came to Augsburg, Bavaria. During this difficult time, he found great peace in a little church where he was attracted to a portrait of Mary unravelling a long, knotted ribbon.

The story goes back three hundred years to a Bavarian nobleman, Wolfgang Lagenmantel, whose marriage to Sophia was on the verge of breaking up. This was a time when Catholics and Protestants were constantly at war, and the separation of a Catholic couple would have

been a publicity disaster. In desperation, Wolfgang went to Father Jacob Rem, a Jesuit known for his wisdom and prayer. Father Rem asked the nobleman to come back to him with the white ribbon which at that time bound the arms of the newly-weds as a symbol of their union. Father Rem was inspired by something that Saint Irenaeus, a second century theologian had written. “The knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. And what the virgin Eve had brought forth through unbelief was set free through Mary’s faith.” After quoting these words he raised the soiled and tangled ribbon high, saying, “In this religious act, I raise the bonds of matrimony, to untie all the knots and to smoothen them.” From that moment on, harmony returned to the couple.

She will unravel your knots

About a hundred years later, their grandson, a priest, recalled this family story and commissioned an artist to paint it. He modelled his painting on Apocalypse, Chapter 12, today’s First Reading, where a woman adorned with the sun crushes the serpent of temptation under her foot. Mary dominates the picture, surrounded by angels, with a crown of stars over her head. At the top of the golden sunlight is a dove, representing the Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary at the conception of her divine son. She stands on a crescent moon which was a symbol of her Immaculate Conception. Her foot crushes a serpent whose body is twisted in knots. An angel on one side brings a twisted, knotted ribbon to Mary while an angel on the other side takes a perfectly restored white ribbon. Mary has untied the knots.

Father Bergoglio found such peace in this picture that he brought a copy with him on his return to Argentina. He set it up in the church where he ministered. The local people were drawn to it. Other parishes followed suit and now the devotion is known worldwide. It’s a picture that ordinary people can understand. They recognise not only the knots of an unhappy marriage but also our knots of anger, anxiety, fear, addiction, guilt and so on. People find great consolation and hope when they bring their problems to the motherly heart of Mary, Untier of Knots.

Prayer

Holy Mary, Mother of the Lord and our mother too. Mother, you always come to the aid of your children in need. I trust that you will take this knotted area of anxiety into your hands (*mention your petition for yourself or another person*). Take this problem to your Divine Son just as you did at the wedding in Cana. You are a sign of sure hope and comfort to your pilgrim children.