

## **Assumption (Aug. 15, 2004)**

Are you familiar with the writing of Kathleen Norris? She is a non-Catholic woman who often writes beautifully about her own experiences in Benedictine monasteries. Here is something she says about celebrating the Feast of the Assumption in a monastery:

“My pleasure in the dogma of the bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven has been greatly enhanced by the experience of hearing a monk who is a physics professor preach on this feast. In his homily he reminded us that while our bodies are indeed made of ‘star-stuff,’ modern cosmology has eliminated any direction called ‘upward.’ He went on to say that Mary’s journey might not be seen so much as upward as inward, a life-long journey toward the kingdom of God within.

“Before I had experienced the celebration of this dogma, I had thought it to be suspiciously escapist and otherworldly. I could not have been more wrong. The Assumption reminds us not to despise this world, even ordinary human flesh, because God has called it good and found it worthy of heaven. It is a story about potentialities, specifically the human potential for goodness, and even holiness, that we so carelessly and consistently obscure. As for the dogma, it’s in there somewhere, less a matter of what I believe than who I am, someone who has very little difficulty with what Coleridge termed ‘the willing suspension of disbelief.’ It’s in the singing and celebrating, and the homilies, in the stories about how beautiful, how generous and fruitful we are, or can be.”

So what Kathleen Norris is saying is that the feast is not just about Mary. It’s about us as well – about the human potential for goodness and holiness. Karl Rahner, an eminent Jesuit theologian, believe it or not, says something that is not too terribly different. In a homily for this day he calls the Assumption the Feast Day of our hope. What hope? Hope that someday eternal life may be ours. Eternal life that for Mary began at the moment of her death as indeed it will for us as well. But also hope for the resurrection of the body which for Mary, unlike us, also began at the moment of her death. And that, of course, is the theological meaning of the Feast: that Mary already enjoys fully the fruits of her Son’s resurrection.

Our hope is that someday that same joy will be ours – a hope that is based on faith in Jesus Christ who has promised to raise us up on the last day.

I have heard some Catholics say that from an ecumenical perspective it was perhaps not entirely wise to declare Mary's Assumption a dogma of faith since so many non-Catholic Christians do not believe it and since it is not specifically present in Scripture. Well I understand what they are saying and why they are saying it. And I have some sympathy with that point of view. But on the other hand, it seems to me that that attitude misses an important point concerning what dogma is all about. Flannery O'Connor once said, "Dogma is an instrument for penetrating reality. Christian dogma is about the only thing left in the world that surely guards and respects mystery."

And mystery is so important a part of our Christian faith, mystery, not in the sense of a puzzle to be solved the way Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot or J. B. Fletcher might solve a mystery, but mystery in the sense of a truth to be lived, one that while leaving us rooted in this blooming, buzzing world of ours, lifts us up at the same time to a sublime relationship with God.

As we celebrate this feast, this mystery of Mary's Assumption we rejoice in contemplating how with God's grace she reached her full potential for goodness and holiness. We know, too, that each of us possesses that same potential and that God calls us all to its fulfillment.

In last week's issue of *America* magazine, Dianne Bergant comments as follows on this feast:

"In some circles, devotion to Mary has waned over the recent past. The image of a docile wife and a stay-at-home mother who is dependent upon others for support has lost its appeal. But today's Gospel paints an entirely different picture of Mary. Though herself with child, she sets aside her own comfort and journeys to the hill country to visit and care for an older relative who will soon give birth. Her prayer is reminiscent of the victory hymns of Miriam, Hannah, and Judith. In it Mary first gives praise to God for according her a dignity that will be recognized by all. She then thanks God for having cared for the lowly and the poor, for having fed the hungry, and for having humbled the arrogant.

"This is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving and victory. While it is

certainly profoundly religious, it is also noticeably political. Mary is concerned with issues of social justice and the future of the nation. She is a self-determined, politically astute, and socially sensitive individual, certainly the kind of person modern women – and men -- would emulate. This feast offers us an opportunity to honor her.” (*America*, vol. 191, no. 3, p. 31.)