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## THE TWELFTH CHAPTER OF THE APOCALYPSE AND OUR LADY'S ASSUMPTION

Now that the dogma of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven has been proclaimed, many might believe that the time had come to turn our efforts to new research and leave aside inquiries into the biblical texts that may or may not contain that dogmatic truth. There is much practical sense in that thought but some interesting questions remain to be solved. What effect will the recent bull *Munificentissimus Deus* have on the age-old problem of the interpretation of the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse? <sup>1</sup> Today I would like to present the general tenets of the interpretation which seems most consonant with the bull. Since this interpretation is derived from what seemed indications and suggestions, it is open to question and is offered in the hope that it may incite some light-producing discussion.

Concerning the much discussed twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse, the bull has one direct reference which we find in the historical survey: "Moreover, the Scholastic Doctors have recognized the Assumption of the Virgin Mother of God as something signified not only in various figures of the Old Testament but also in that Woman clothed with the Sun whom John the Apostle contemplated on the Island of Patmos." <sup>2</sup>

Our work will be divided into four parts of unequal length and importance:

1. An evaluation of the direct reference;
2. an argument drawn from the stress laid by the Holy

<sup>1</sup> In relation to this problem, I can refer to no study so exhaustive as that of Father D. Unger, O.F.M.Cap., *Did St. John See the Virgin Mary in Glory?* in, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 11, 1949, no. 3, 4; 12, 1950, no. 1, 2, 3, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Munificentissimus Deus*. Throughout this paper I shall use Father J. C. Fenton's translation as presented in *The Register*, Nov. 26, 1950, pp. 2-3.



Father on the expression "new Eve," to bring out the worth of the parallel between Genesis 3, and Apocalypse XII;

3. a question about the silence of the rest of the bull concerning Apocalypse XII;

4. a conclusion consisting of the interpretation which the bull seems to suggest.

1. The direct reference to Apocalypse XII in the bull is found in a context which is very deceiving for all those who may have expected an authentic interpretation. The *moreover* introducing the reference sends us back to the preceding paragraph where we read: "Often there are theologians and preachers who, following in the footsteps of the holy Fathers, have been rather free in their use of events and expressions taken from Sacred Scripture to explain their belief in the Assumption. Thus, to mention a few of the texts frequently cited in this fashion . . .";<sup>3</sup> and there follows an enumeration containing: *Psalm* 131, 8; *Psalm* 44, 10, 14 ff.; and *Cant.* 3, 6; 4, 8; 6, 9.

Situated as it is, the reference to Apocalypse XII can hardly be construed as reflecting the thought of the Supreme Authority. The most one can draw from the reference, I believe, is that the mariological interpretation—to quote Doctor Coppens, "is not devoid of all foundation."<sup>4</sup> But that was already accepted by a great number of exegetes.<sup>5</sup>

2. Let us pass on to the interesting perspective opened before us by the stress and bull lays upon the appellation of "new Eve." After the long exposé of the teachings offered by the Fathers, Doctors, and Theologians, the Pope says. "We must remember especially that, since the second century, the Virgin Mary has been designated by the holy Fathers as the new Eve, who, although subject to the new Adam, is most

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> J. Coppens, *La définibilité de l'Assomption*, Bruges, (2 ed), 1947, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Unger, *art. cit.*



intimately associated with him in that struggle against the infernal foe which, as foretold in the protoevangelium, finally resulted in that most complete victory over the sin and death which are always mentioned together in the writings of the Apostle of the Gentiles."<sup>6</sup>

From this text, a number of points can be made. The Pope calls our *special* attention to the title of "new Eve." He also gives us to understand that the protoevangelium contains the revelation of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven—it was "foretold" as an element of "that most complete victory over sin and death."

In Genesis 3, we find three characters: the Woman, the Serpent, and the Woman's seed. A powerful and evil serpent or dragon is mentioned elsewhere in Sacred Scripture,<sup>7</sup> just as the woman in labor is a figure familiar to everyone versed in the Bible,<sup>8</sup> but Apocalypse XII is the only place outside Genesis 3, where the Woman is face to face with her enemy, the Dragon, in the presence of the Woman's seed—a kind of innocent bystander. If these three characters, Eve, the Serpent, and Eve's offspring were chosen by God as a vehicle for the revelation of Mary's privileges, then, if the Woman, the Dragon, and the Woman's seed of Apocalypse XII were the same as the original trio, it would be more than possible that Apocalypse XII had a mariological meaning, even one that included the Assumption.

Some thirty years ago, Father Bover<sup>9</sup> was struck by the potentialities of this parallel and worked it out in great detail. More recently, Father Jugie drew our attention to the way St. John seems to go out of his way to identify his Dragon with

<sup>6</sup> *Munificentissimus Deus*, Fenton's translation.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., *Is.* 51, 9.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., *Mich.* 4, 9; *Jer.* 4, 31.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Bover, S.J., *El capítulo XII del Apocalipsis y el capítulo III del Génesis*, in *Estudios Eclesiásticos*, 1922, pp. 319-326.



that of the Garden of Eden.<sup>10</sup> He even calls him "that old serpent who is called the devil and Satan, who seduceth the whole world" (v. 9), "the accuser of our brethren . . . who accused them before our God" (v. 10)<sup>11</sup>

The Dragon's enemy is called simply the Woman in Apocalypse XII and in Genesis 3, 15. In Genesis the Woman was Eve and also the Blessed Virgin, as both Pius IX<sup>12</sup> and Pius XII<sup>13</sup> told us by basing the proclamations of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption on that text. Now, the Holy Father draws our "special" attention to the title of "new Eve." Could there be an allusion to Apocalypse XII in that insistence? In that case the New Testament would once again complete the Old Testament. The prophecy "foretold" in Genesis would find its fulfillment narrated in Apocalypse.

The parallel is striking when we stop to think how mysterious had been the first meeting between the Woman and the Dragon. Why was the Serpent the Woman's enemy? Why should he try to induce the happy Eve into sin? Then again were there any episodes to the Serpent's "lying in wait for her heel,"<sup>14</sup> before the "complete victory"? The twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse fills in the missing scenes of this great drama. There, we find the reason for the Dragon's hatred of the Woman and her seed: Lucifer's rebellion and consequent exclusion from heaven.<sup>15</sup> There too, the episodes of the struggle are narrated: the Dragon tried to devour the Woman's male child (v. 4); not succeeding in this, he persecutes the Woman (v. 13), and when she is removed from his reach, he turns against "the rest of her seed," identified as those "who

<sup>10</sup> M. Jugie, A.A., *La mort et l'Assomption de la sainte Vierge. Etude historico-doctrinale*. (Studi e Testi 114) Città del Vaticano, 1944, pp. 21-33.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Job* 1, 9; 2, 9; *Zach.* 3, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Ineffabilis Deus*, in *Acta Pii IX*, Pars I, vol. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. note 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Genesis* 3, 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Apoc.* 12, 3-4, 7-10.



keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (v. 17). The outcome of the personal antagonism between the Dragon and the Woman is complete victory for the Woman who is taken to a place of safety where the Dragon can no longer trouble her (v. 14).

This way of looking at Apocalypse XII as the narration of the accomplishing of the prophecy of Genesis 3, 15 seems to best suit the Pope's advice to "remember especially" that Mary is the "new Eve." In Genesis the Woman was Eve. Eve faced the Serpent and Eve was the type of the Blessed Virgin. There, she was called simply the Woman. In the Apocalypse, the Woman once again faces the Serpent, the same Serpent; would she again be the Blessed Virgin, the "new Eve"?

3. The question now arises—If Apocalypse XII brings before us the same characters as Genesis 3, with a wealth of complementary detail barely suspected in the Old Testament account, why did the Holy Father use only the text from Genesis as scriptural foundation for the dogmatic definition?

To that, many answers can be offered. The first would be that he wished to respect the opinions of the Fathers, Doctors, and Theologians who saw in the Woman of the Apocalypse not Mary but the Church. This way of thinking can claim for itself many precedents among which we might recall the refusal of the Fathers of the Council of Trent to decide between divergent opinions held by St. Jerome and St. Augustine concerning the Sacred Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

I believe, however, that another reason is suggested by the dogmatic bull: it would not be opportune to say outright that the Woman of the Apocalypse is the Blessed Virgin and the Church, both intended literally by St. John. At the present time, exegetical theory has only one generally accepted way of

<sup>16</sup> Theiner, *Acta genuina ss. oecum. conc. Trident.* Agram, s. d. [1874] v. 1, pp. 51-52.



understanding this multiple literal value of a term and that is the typical meaning. The typical meaning explains very well prophetic texts such as Exodus 12, where the pasch is the lamb, victim under the law, and Christ, victim of the New Alliance.<sup>16a</sup> Apocalypse XII is not a prophetic text since Mary and the Church are contemporaries, and St. John speaks of them both in the past, present, and future. Moreover, Mary could not be the type of the Church, since in its ordinary acceptance the type has "a reference to some future, prophetic antitype, which is more perfect than the type."<sup>17</sup> In this case, "the type would be more perfect than the antitype."<sup>18</sup>

This difficulty was apparently evident to Perrella,<sup>19</sup> Di Fonzo,<sup>20</sup> and Rivera,<sup>21</sup> and they are seeking a way out. As yet, no one has been able to prevail. With exegetical theory in its present state, what would be the result of a formal pronouncement from the Supreme Teaching Authority saying that both Mary and the Church must be understood as the Woman of the Apocalypse? Nothing but confusion would follow. We are not yet ready to assimilate that kind of information.

In this connection, *Munificentissimus Deus* presents an instructive parallel. We read that, although a considerable number of Fathers of the Vatican Council petitioned the Apostolic See for a dogmatic definition of the Blessed Virgin's bodily Assumption into heaven, nothing seemed to come of it,

<sup>16a</sup> Cf. *I. Cor.* 5, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Unger, *art. cit.*, p. 410.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>19</sup> Gaetano M. Perrella, *Senso mariologico dell'Apocalisse XII*, in *Divus Thomas* (Plac.), 3rd series, vol. 17, 1940, pp. 215-222.

Gaetano M. Perrella, *Sulla terminologia circa il senso mariologico dell'Apocalisse*, in *Divus Thomas* (Plac.) 3rd series, vol. 19, 1942, pp. 96-103.

<sup>20</sup> Lorenzo De Fonzo, O.F.M.Conv., *Intorno al senso mariologico dell'Apocalisse, c. XII*, in *Marianum*, vol. 3, 1941, pp. 248-268.

<sup>21</sup> A. Rivera, C.M.F., *Inimicitias ponam . . . Signum magnum apparuit* (*Gen.* III, 15); (*Apoc.* XII, 1), in *Verbum Domini*, vol. 21, 1941, pp. 113-122, 183-189.



except an encouragement to make more petitions and to carry on theological investigation until the moment arrived when all human difficulties had been removed by "the work, the science, the wisdom of the theologians." Then, and only then, would the Holy Father proclaim the Assumption as a dogma.

An authentic interpretation of Apocalypse XII would tell us that both Mary and the Church are literally intended by St. John: the Church, because the whole Apocalypse concerns the Church and its struggles; Mary, because of the parallel between Genesis 3, 15 and our chapter of the Apocalypse. So the Holy Father is satisfied with a suggestion to "remember especially the title of 'new Eve,'" thereby drawing our attention to the parallel without infringing on the ecclesiological meaning of the Apocalypse.

4. It now remains for us to draw a conclusion from our deductions. Since Mary is the "new Eve" facing the Dragon just as the first Eve did, then, Apocalypse XII has a mariological meaning and the interpretations which fail to see Mary at all in the Woman must be modified considerably. In this connection, I would like to add to Father Unger's long enumeration,<sup>22</sup> the names of Father Poirier<sup>23</sup> and Father Malo.<sup>24</sup> Of course, since no authentic interpretation has been handed down, this position can still be held but it is becoming precarious and should be expressed in a way that will leave room for a mariological meaning.

The other extreme opinion which sees only the Blessed Virgin in Apocalypse XII has been presented recently by Father Bonnefoy.<sup>25</sup> The silence of the bull seems to discredit

<sup>22</sup> Unger, *art. cit.*, *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> L. Poirier, O.F.M., *Le chapitre XII de l'Apocalypse fait-il allusion à l'Assomption?*, in *Vers le Dogme de l'Assomption*, Montréal, 1948, pp. 93-102.

<sup>24</sup> A. M. Malo, O.F.M., *La Bible et l'Assomption*, in *Vers le Dogme de l'Assomption*, Montréal, 1948, p. 117.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Fr. Bonnefoy, O.F.M., *Les interprétations ecclésiologiques du chapitre XII de l'Apocalypse*, in *Marianum*, vol. 9, 1947, pp. 207-222.



this opinion no little. Comparing the seemingly explicit character of Apocalypse XII to the vague affirmation of Genesis 3, it would seem unreasonable to prefer the vague to the precise if Apocalypse XII did not have an ecclesiological meaning as well as a mariological.

The moderate opinion which is rallying more and more exegetes sees in Apocalypse XII both Mary and the Church. After that, it splits up into a multitude of private preferences.

The bull seems to point to something quite new. The title "new Eve" draws our special attention to the parallel between Genesis 3, 15 and Apocalypse XII, and suggests an apocalyptic counterpart to the typical sense found in prophetic texts, something that would see in the Woman both Mary and the Church in the literal sense. Only further study can bring out what this sense will be and, maybe, the last word about pluriliteralism has not been said. I mention this not because I believe we have a case of pluriliteralism in Apocalypse XII but because that theory may offer us an element of solution to the difficulties brought up by the contemporary "implicit-explicit sense,"<sup>26</sup> "symbolic sense,"<sup>27</sup> and "fuller sense,"<sup>28</sup> which seem to break down when applied to the Virgin Mary.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Perrella—note 19.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Di Fonzo—note 20.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Rivera—note 21.