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LAWRENCE P. EVERETT, C.Ss.R.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

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Father Everett is a member of the Mariological Society of America and his paper read at the second annual convention of that group, “The Nexus Between Mary’s Co-Redemption Role and Her Other Prerogatives,” was published in Marian Studies (v. 2, 1951). In October 1949 the American Ecclesiastical Review published Father Everett’s detailed study, “Our Lady in the American Ecclesiastical Review.”

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(published with ecclesiastical approval)
MARY, ASSUMED INTO HEAVEN

LAWRENCE P. EVERETT, C.Ss.R.

On May 1, 1946, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical letter entitled: Deiparae Virginis Mariae (Of the Virgin Mother of God). In this letter our Holy Father announced that the Holy See has received thousands of petitions asking that the Assumption of our Blessed Mother into Heaven be defined as a dogma of our Faith. These petitions were submitted by Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, priests, religious, and a host of the laity. Most notable of all the petitioners were nearly 200 Bishops attending the Ecumenical Council of the Vatican held in the latter part of the last century.

The theologians of the Catholic Church knew that this encyclical, Deiparae Virginis Mariae, was a definite step toward the final definition of Mary's Assumption into Heaven. For, in this letter, Pope Pius XII followed the example of his predecessors and especially that of Pope Pius IX before the definition of Mary's Immaculate Conception.

Urged on by these petitions, Pope Pius XII — as did Pope Pius IX — turned to the Bishops of the Catholic Church throughout the world and asked them to enlighten him on this important question. He sought after information on the following points. He asked them first, with what devotion do their flocks honor Mary in the mystery of the Assumption; and secondly—and this is, by far, the more important question—do the Bishops, themselves, in their wise and prudent judgment, think that the Assumption can be defined; and do they, together with their clergy and people, desire the definition.

OUR HOLY FATHER RECEIVED AN ALMOST UNANIMOUS AFFIRMATIVE response to these questions. Therefore, he had infallible assurance that Mary's Assumption into Heaven is a fact revealed to us by God even before he defined it 'ex cathedra.' For our Divine Saviour invested the Bishops of the Catholic Church with infallibility when they teach as a group a doctrine of faith or morals in union with the Holy See.

Thus, on November 1, 1950, the prayers of the lovers of Mary throughout the world were answered. Surrounded by thousands of the faithful from all parts of the world, Pope Pius XII spoke these solemn words in St. Peter's Square in Rome: "... By the authority of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles, Peter and Paul, and by Our own authority, We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely
revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into Heaven." To these words our Holy Father added this warning: "It is forbidden for anyone to change this, our declaration, pronouncement, and definition, or, by rash attempt, to oppose and counter it. If any man should presume to make such an attempt, let him know that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul."

**ATTEMPTS HAVE BEEN MADE TO OPPOSE THIS DEFINITION OF OUR**
**Holy Father. These words of Pope Pius stirred up a storm of protest from**
**the non-Catholic world. And, of all places, the loudest opposition came**
**from the Church of England. I say 'of all places . . . from the Church of**
**England' advisedly. For in the year 1399 Thomas Arundel, the Catholic**
**Archbishop of Canterbury, said: " . . . we English, being the servants of**
**our Lady's special inheritance and her own Dowry, as we are commonly**
**called, ought to surpass all others in the fervor of our praises and devotion."

But Canterbury has since passed from Catholic to Anglican hand. Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, the present Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, very foolishly termed the Assumption of Mary "a doctrine completely foreign to the Bible and ancient universal beliefs" and, together with the Anglican Archbishop of York, Dr. Cyril Foster Garbett, he issued a joint statement in which they positively declared that "the Church of England does not and cannot hold this doctrine to be a necessary part of the Catholic Faith." They were immediately supported by the Rt. Rev. Henry Knox Sherrill, presiding Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Archbishops expressed the profound regret that "the Roman Catholic Church has chosen by this act to increase dogmatic differences in Christendom."

**IT IS NOT OUR PURPOSE TO TRACE ENGLAND'S BELIEF IN THE**
**Assumption through the annals of her history. Yet, we cannot let these**
**remarks pass without a brief notice. Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, the Anglican**
**Archbishop of Canterbury, called the Assumption "a doctrine com-**
**pletely foreign to ancient universal beliefs." I wonder if he realizes that**
**devotion to the feast of the Assumption in England alone dates back at**
**least one thousand three hundred and forty years . . . to the time of St.**
**Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, Apostle of England, who**
**converted England to Christianity. And the belief of the faithful in a**
**doctrine does not begin with the institution of a feast to honor the doctrine,**
**rather the institution of a feast means that the belief of the faithful has**
**come to maturity. And had Dr. Fisher but hurriedly glanced through the**
**pages of history before he made his remark, he would have found that**
a predecessor of his in the See of Canterbury by almost 900 years, the Catholic Archbishop Lanfranc (1005-1089), placed the feast of the Assumption of Mary among the principal Marian feasts in the Canterbury Church calendar. Finally, long before the time of Archbishop Lanfranc, England's King Alfred (871-901), made the Assumption not only a legal holiday but decreed that there was to be no work for the seven days preceding it.

As for Dr. Garbett, he must have been terribly embarrassed when he found out that there is a 500 year old monument in his own York Cathedral depicting the Assumption of our Blessed Mother into Heaven. And we must allow, in all charity, that neither Dr. Fisher nor Dr. Garbett attended Eton College, the most famous school for boys in all England. Eton was founded in 1440 by King Henry VI who called it "... our royal college of the Blessed Virgin of Eton, near Windsor, founded by us in honor of the Assumption of the said most blessed Virgin." Eton's first charter, as well as its original seal, bear the image of Our Lady being Assumed into Heaven.

Although we are concerned with neither Dr. Fisher nor Dr. Garbett here, we do wish to show what they do not believe, namely, that the Assumption of Mary into Heaven is in the Bible and in the ancient universal beliefs of the Church. Consequently, it is our purpose to show that the Assumption of our Blessed Mother has been revealed to us by God and that the Holy Father was justified, therefore, in defining it as a dogma of our Faith.

But let us first define our terms. The terms of our thesis are three: 1) definition, i.e., what is meant by a solemn definition of the Pope; 2) revelation, i.e., in what ways can a doctrine be revealed to us by God; 3) assumption, i.e., what is contained in the notion of Mary's Assumption into Heaven.

1) Definition: a definition by our Holy Father is a solemn, infallible and, therefore, irrevocable pronouncement that a certain doctrine of faith or morals is contained in God's revelation to man.

2) In what ways can a doctrine be revealed to us by God: a doctrine can be revealed to us by God either explicitly or implicitly in Sacred Scripture or in Tradition. A doctrine is contained explicitly in revelation when it has been revealed to us by God in clear and precise terms. Thus, for example, there is an explicit revelation in Sacred Scripture that Baptism is necessary for salvation. We read in St. John 3:5, "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God."
doctrine is implicitly contained in revelation when it is told to us by God as a part of a more comprehensive truth. Thus, for example, Sacred Scripture tells us explicitly that our Divine Saviour, looking down upon Jerusalem and contemplating its future destruction because of the sins of its people, wept over it. In this God is telling us implicitly that Christ had a tremendous love for the people of that city. It is in this manner that the Assumption of our Blessed Mother into Heaven is contained in the pages of Sacred Scripture: the Assumption of Mary into Heaven is implicitly contained in the revealed fact that Mary was never under the power of Satan to the slightest degree.

3) Assumption: by the Assumption of our Blessed Mother we mean that her sacred body, from which the Son of God took His Flesh, did not turn to dust; that Mary did not have to wait until the end of the world for her resurrection from the grave as we do; that shortly after her death she was taken soul and body into the eternal Kingdom of Heaven.

LET US NOW SEE HOW THESE TRUTHS ARE CONTAINED IMPLICITLY in the inspired pages of Sacred Scripture. In the third chapter of the Book of Genesis Moses tells us the story of the Fall of our First Parents. God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Paradise. Because they were unfaithful to His command, He took from them and from their descendants—the entire human race—the tremendous gifts which He bestowed upon them in their creation. These were the supernatural gift of sanctifying grace—which is a share in God's own Divine Life and Happiness—and the preternatural gifts of freedom from concupiscence, freedom from ignorance, freedom from sickness, and freedom from death with corruption of the body in the grave. Thus it was that sin and its consequences, namely, disease, concupiscence, death with corruption of the body in the grave were brought into this world by Satan. For Satan tempted our First Parents to break God's command. They listened to his words and these evils befell them and the entire human race.

Commenting on the fall of our First Parents, St. Paul tells us under Divine inspiration in his Epistles that death came into the world and reigns over mankind through that sin by which Satan conquered the head of the human race (Rom. 5:12). Satan, therefore, is the ruler of the empire of death (Heb. 2:14). Satan rules over the just and even the saints as long as they bear a body doomed to corruption because of the sin of Adam (Rom. 8:10). As long as our bodies remain dust in the earth after death we are still under the dominion of Satan and we long for the freedom of our bodies from the dust of the grave which will come only at the general resurrection (Rom. 8:23). This will take place for all of us only at
the end of the world, when Christ's victory over Satan which He gained by His death on the cross will completely free us from Satan's power, when this body will then put on immortality, and when death will be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:52-55).

Thus it is clear from the words of St. Paul that the only reason why our bodies as well as our souls do not enter Heaven immediately after death is because we will be under the power of Satan—who caused this situation—until the end of the world.

And in those inspired words of St. Paul we find God's own interpretation of the curse He spoke to Adam and to the whole human race in the Garden of Eden: "... thou shalt return to the earth out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return (Gen. 3:19).

**BUT THERE IS A VERY BRIGHT SIDE TO THE STORY OF THE FALL OF our First Parents.** Shortly after Adam ate the forbidden fruit at the instigation of the devil, Moses tells us in the Book of Genesis that God appeared in the Garden of Eden and spoke these words to Satan: "... because thou hast done this thing... upon thy breast thou shalt go, and earth thou shalt eat all the days of thy life. I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and (between) thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head..."

According to the teaching of the Catholic Church as seen in her earliest tradition, and recently in the teaching of the Fathers of the Vatican Council, of Pope Pius IX in the definition of the Immaculate Conception, of Pope Pius XII in the definition of Mary's Assumption into Heaven, these words spoken by God to the devil have reference to our Blessed Mother. She is the woman whom God will raise up and who with her Son (her Seed) will carry on an unrelenting war against the devil and who will gain a complete victory over him. The completeness of this victory is symbolized in Satan grovelling in the dust at her feet (Gen. 3:14) and in Mary crushing his head with her immaculate foot. Between Mary and Satan, therefore, there can be nothing in common. And, least of all, will Satan ever have her under his power to the slightest degree.

**CONSEQUENTLY, GOD HAD TO KEEP MARY FREE FROM EVERY EVIL** which Satan brought into the world. Otherwise her victory would not have been complete and perfect as God Himself predicted. Mary had to be kept free from the slightest taint of original as well as actual sin and from the consequences of sin, namely, death with corruption of the body, concupiscence, sickness, and from the necessity of waiting until the general resurrection at the end of the world for the glorification of her sacred body in Heaven.
That Mary was completely free from the power of Satan and never subject to the evils which the devil brought into the world is clear from the teaching of the Church on the many prerogatives of soul and body with which God enriched His Blessed Mother. Mary was free from sin through her Immaculate Conception as defined by Pope Pius IX (Dec. 8, 1854), and from even the slightest venial fault during her life on earth as taught by the Council of Trent. She was free from the stings of concupiscence through her perpetual virginity of mind and body. And she was free from the corruption of the grave and from the necessity of waiting until the end of time for her resurrection and glorious entrance into Heaven through her bodily Assumption.

There are doctrines contained in the pages of Sacred Scripture which have been the subjects of development in the course of time. By this development of doctrine is meant that our knowledge of the truths which God has revealed to us becomes more and more clear. Through deeper study, and prayer for Divine Light the Church has seen, in the course of her history, truths of Faith which she did not realize were there in the early years of her existence.

THUS IT IS THAT EXPLICIT MENTION OF THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY into Heaven does not appear in the writings of the Fathers of the first few centuries. They did, however, speak of Mary as "The New Eve" who, by her obedience to the Angel's request that she become the Mother of the Redeemer, undid the evil caused by the consent of the First Eve to the devil's temptation.

As the years passed, the explicit belief of the Faithful in the fact that Mary's sacred body was taken by her Divine Son into the everlasting Kingdom of Heaven began to take root in their hearts. Thus, the feast of the Assumption was well established in the East when the Emperor Maurice (582-602) fixed the date at August 15. And we know from Theodore Petrensis in his biography of his contemporary, the Palestinian Abbot St. Theodosius (ca. 423-529) that the feast of the Assumption was observed in Jerusalem around the year 500.

Let us now depart for a moment from theological argument and historical reference in order to put a few simple questions to the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Geoffrey Fisher.

I am certain, Dr. Fisher, that you would not allow the body of your mother to rot in the grave were it in your power to prevent this curse. Would you stand by and let the lips that kissed away your tears as a child curl up in decay? Would you let the lovely face you loved to kiss
become the food of worms? If you are a man and not a machine, I am sure you would not. Yet, you have to admit that Christ had this power and still you claim that He did not act as you would were you in His place. For you said that the Church of England cannot hold that the Assumption of Mary into Heaven is a necessary part of the Catholic Faith.

Surely, too, Dr. Fisher, you must have attended the burial service of a mother. You have seen children eat out their hearts at the sight of mother being lowered into her final resting place. Did not the thought ever occur to you that it would be a wonderful thing if you had Christ's power to say to those children as He did at the funeral of the ruler's daughter: "She is not dead, but is only asleep...take her home now."

Was not Christ true Man as well as true God? And did not St. Paul say that He is like unto us in all things except sin (Heb. 4:15, Phil. 2:7)?

No, Dr. Fisher, Christ had a very tender love for His Blessed Mother. He could not let His Mother's sacred body rot in the grave but acted as you or I would have his the same power. Shortly after her death He sent the brightest Angels in the whole court of Heaven with the command: "Bring her home now."

If I appear sentimental, Dr. Fisher, I am only using the thoughts of Pope Pius XII, the Vicar of Christ on Earth. He is God's spokesman on earth for you as well as for me. Let us hear what he has to say in the Apostolic Constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus*, in which he defined the Assumption of God's Mother into Heaven: "...it seems impossible to think of her, the one who conceived Christ, brought Him forth, nursed Him with her milk, held Him in her arms, and clasped Him to her breast, as being apart from Him in body, even though not in soul, after His earthly life. Since our Redeemer is the Son of Mary, He could not do otherwise, as the perfect observer of God's law, than to honor, not only His eternal Father, but also His beloved Mother. And, since it was within His power to grant her this great honor, to preserve her from the corruption of the tomb, we must believe that He really acted in this way."

I have mentioned the fact of the development of dogma. Some of God's revelations to man are but obscurely contained in the pages of Sacred Scripture. And that is one of the reasons why He established the Catholic Church: to open up this revelation through study and prayer for Divine Light. Thus, we find certain truths of our Faith more clearly expressed in one century than in a previous century.

This is the activity of the Holy Ghost operating through the Church given
to her on the first Pentecost Sunday. Now the Holy Ghost is not only with the teaching but also with the believing Church: with the faithful in their beliefs as well as with the Church’s teachers in their pronouncements on the content of divine revelation.

THUS WE FIND A DEVELOPMENT IN THE BELIEFS OF THE FAITHFUL along with the development in the Church’s teaching. This development, of course, is merely the explicit belief on the part of the faithful in a later century of what was implicitly believed in an earlier century.

We have seen, in passing, that though the Fathers of the Church in the first few centuries did not clearly teach, in explicit terms, the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, they taught this truth implicitly in their comparison of Mary with Eve; they taught this doctrine, likewise, in their explicit teaching on the absolute sinlessness of Mary and they taught it especially in the exalted language with which they extolled the Mother of God.

As the years passed the belief of the Faithful in the fact that the Mother of God could not suffer the corruption of the tomb and did not have to wait until the end of the world for the resurrection of her immaculate body became very explicit.

These beliefs on the part of the faithful found expression in what are known as the apocryphal gospels whose authors, as the title indicates, are unknown. These so-called "Gospels" were not, of course inspired by God and, unfortunately, they are the first written record wherein we find explicit mention of the Assumption. Non-Catholics frequently accuse us of basing our belief in the Assumption of Mary on these writings. Nothing could be further from the truth, as we have already shown. Yet, these apocryphal gospels have a value in that they are witnesses to a living tradition in the belief in the glorious Assumption into Heaven of the Immaculate Mother of God.
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