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The Dogma of the Assumption in the Light of the First Seven Ecumenical Councils

Gregory Cardinal Peter XV Agagianian
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory Peter XV Cardinal Agagianian is perhaps one of the best-known of the non-American Cardinals. He has become familiar to American Catholic and non-Catholic readers because of the publicity given to his appointment to succeed Cardinal Stritch as Pro-prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Faith in June, 1958. At this time and during the period following the death of the late Pius XII, he was considered by many observers as one of the most likely “candidates” for the Papacy. His two trips to the United States in 1954 and in May of this past year have served to bring him to the attention of the American public.

Born in the Russian Caucasus sixty-five years ago, Cardinal Agagianian grew up in what is now Russian Georgia. At the age of 11 he was sent to the Urban College of the Propaganda in Rome. It is reported that his outstanding performance there led Pope Pius X to utter these prophetic words to him: “You will be a priest, a bishop, and a patriarch.” Ordained in Rome in 1917, he spent most of the next seventeen years in the Eternal City as teacher and scholar. He acquired an elegant reputation as a linguist, for he is not only fluent in his native Armenian, but also in Italian, French, English, Russian, Latin, and Greek.

In 1935 Pope Pius XI consecrated him a bishop and sent him as his representative at the Patriarchal Institute in Bzommar, Lebanon. He was elected Patriarch two years later, with his seat in Beirut, and was made a cardinal in 1946.

As Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians, Cardinal Agagianian leads an estimated 100,000 Catholics of the Armenian Rite. Unlike 3,500,000 non-Catholic Armenians (Gregorians), their differences with Rome are not doctrinal, but canonical and liturgical, e.g., the liturgy is in a modified classical Armenian. A favorite with both Armenian groups, the Patriarch is a symbol of the Church’s hope for reunion with the Christian bodies as well as her struggles to hold on to her own children behind the Iron Curtain.

Recently appointed Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Faith, Cardinal Agagianian is also a member of the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office.

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CHANGE OF NAME

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After the learned and exhausting doctrinal and historical lessons, imparted during the past days by capable teachers in connection with the dogmatic definition of the most glorious privilege of the Mother of God assumed into heaven body and soul, the simple words which I am preparing to pronounce at the kind invitation of Father Balic, soul of this beautiful initiative, cannot have any other character but that of a humble homage "ex imo corde" to the most gentle Queen of Heaven like an introduction of the songs and hymns which the sons of the Christian East in harmonious fusion of voices and minds with the brethren of the West will execute shortly, echoing the faith and ardent love of past centuries, but always actual, toward the Mother of God, ever-Virgin.

The dogma of the assumption in the light of the first seven ecumenical councils: such is the theme proposed to me.

Let us say at once that the first seven ecumenical councils — the only ones which are recognized as such by the Byzantine-slavic world (the Nestorians, of course recognize only the first two and the Monophysites only the first three) do not speak explicitly of the Assumption of the Most Holy Virgin as they do not treat of other such truths of faith.

The reason for this silence is clear: the councils have always had as motive, or at least as a proximate occasion, the defense, the classification and the proclamation of a truth attacked or deformed by a heresy.

On the other hand, history shows what we would expect — that the first heresies and the first deviations, and consequently also the first councils, have had as object principally the highest and fundamental dogmas of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Incarnation of the Only-begotten Word. They discussed the Mother of God only in connection with the above truths.

And thus, the Ecumenical Council of Nice in 325 had for object the consubstantiality of the Father and of the Word against the denials of Arianism.

The second, held at Constantinople in 381, defined against the denial of Macedonius, the divinity of the Holy Spirit, Lord and Unifier, proceeding from the Father, and being adored together with the Father and the Son.
The third council was held at Ephesus in 431 to consider the errors of Nestorius and can be considered as a Marian council. Nestorius, in fact, affirming that in Christ there are not only two distinct natures but two distinct subjects, two persons, that of the Word, the Only-begotten of the Father, and that of the Son of Mary, united by an external moral bond, asserted consequently, that Mary was not able to be called properly the Mother of God, Theotokos, but only Mother of Christ, that is Mother of that Man in Whom God dwelt.

The Fathers, gathered at Ephesus, affirmed vigorously that Christ is one subject, only one person, that of the Word of God, subsisting and operating in two natures, the divine and human, and that, consequently, Mary by giving birth to Christ according to his human nature is truly Mother of God, since the subject of generation is not the nature or part of the nature but the person or hypostasis, which is one in Christ, the divine person of the Word.

History reveals to us the striking fact that the people of Ephesus, despite the summer heat (it was June 22, 431) waited anxiously the entire day before the church where the bishops of the council had convened. When late in the evening the doors of the church were opened and the people were informed of the definition of the council which proclaimed as dogma of faith the divine maternity of Mary, Theotokos, they broke out in cries of joy and the bishops were accompanied to their residences with torches and songs.

The reaction of the faithful was most fitting: the divine maternity is the foundation and the principle of all the privileges which the Catholic faith recognizes and vindicates in the Most Holy Virgin.

The fourth ecumenical council held at Chalcedon in October 451 against Eutychianism, renewing the condemnation of Nestorius, proclaims the hypostatic union in the person of the Word, of two natures, divine and human, and declares the Word “ante saecula de Patre genitum secundum deitatem, in novissimis autem diebus eundem ex Maria Virgine Dei Genitrice secundum humanitatem ... consubstantialem Patri secundum deitatem, consubstantialem nobis secundum humanitatem . . .”

Note well how Mary, the Mother of God is called the Virgin. In fact, the virginity joined to the maternity is another unique privilege bestowed upon Mary and is a title to other prerogatives.

The fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II in 553) and the sixth (Constantinople III, in 680-681 against Monothelitism) confirm the divine maternity and recognize Mary as truly and properly
Theotokos, and the ever-Virgin in whom the Word of God became incarnate and of whom, He was born, according to His humanity, through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

The seventh ecumenical council, (second Nicaean) held in 787 against Iconoclasm, defines the legitimacy of the cult rendered to sacred images, "among others, to that of Our Lady Immaculate, the Holy Mother of God."

In summation we can say that the first seven ecumenical councils have explicitly taught and defined the divine maternity, the consubstantiality of the flesh of Christ with that of Mary (by whom it was formed through the activity of the Holy Spirit) and her perpetual virginity.

Should we then conclude that the dogma of the Assumption is foreign to the first seven councils?

Certainly not. The parable of the grain of mustard seed, applied by the Divine Master to His kingdom, does not refer only to the external development and expansion of the Church throughout the world in spite of every obstacle and persecution; it is intended likewise as a symbol of the growth of the internal life of the Church and particularly of the greater knowledge and penetration of the truths which Jesus has brought down from heaven and, through his Apostles, definitively entrusted to His Church.

Although the deposit of divine revelation, whose sources are sacred Scripture and Tradition, has actually been closed with the death of the last Apostle, nevertheless not every truth contained in it, explicitly and implicitly, was proposed with equal clearness from the beginning. But such clarification has taken place and continues to the present day with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and under the watchful guidance of the living and infallible magisterium of the Church, sometimes through peaceful meditations and investigations and at other times through struggles or crises of great intensity as, for example, the trinitarian, christological, and other controversies.

Hence it is certain that the definitions and teachings, particularly of the ecumenical councils, which constitute splendid and authentic testimonies of divine revelation, can contain, in germ, truths which down through the ages under the force of new circumstances (greater penetration and supervening negations) came to be explicitly proposed and infallibly defined by the voice of the supreme ecclesiastical magisterium.

Now, on the one hand, as is evident, the first councils define and
affirm clearly the divine and mysterious maternity of Mary; the con-
substantiality of the flesh of Christ with the flesh of Mary, and the
most pure perpetual virginity of the Mother of God, joined to the
maternity — truths, moreover, explicitly contained in Sacred Scrip-
ture and Tradition from the first centuries, and of which the Fathers
testify beginning with St. Ignatius, St. Justin, St. Irenaeus and others.
On the other hand, scarcely do explicit testimonies of the preservation
from corruption and of the assumption of Mary into heaven appear
that we find them joined to the truths of the divine maternity, of the
perpetual virginity and, almost always, as one of their necessary con-
sequences. This is verified not only in the liturgy but also in the
Fathers and ecclesiastical writers.

Hence it is necessary to conclude that the dogma of the Assumption
has been implicitly and in germ taught by the first councils.

Let us briefly illustrate this fact, making use of the dogmatic con-
stitution *Munificentissimus Deus*.

In liturgical books there is the renowned Sacramentarium which
Hadrian I entrusted to Charlemagne. There, the prayer for the feast
of the Dormition and Assumption of the Most Holy Mary reads thus:
"Worthy of veneration is for us, 0 Lord, today's festivity, in which
the Holy Mother of God underwent temporal death but was not able
to be held prisoner by the chains of death, she who generated Thy
Son, Our Lord, incarnate in her."

In the Greek *Menei* we read: "To thee (Mary) God, King of the
universe, granted things which are above nature: since as in birth
He preserved thee a virgin, so in the sepulcher He kept thy body
incorrupt, and with the divine translation, He glorified thee."

And in the *Innario Armeno* one sings: "Today Thou has trans-
ferred from us to the supreme choirs her who being preserved from
the crimes, but not the sorrows of the first woman, generated Thy
Son in the flesh. Thou, consubstantial with the Father and the Spirit,
has taken flesh from the Holy Virgin, Thy Mother, assumed today
to the heavenly tabernacles."

Of this faith the Fathers and Doctors of the Church are not less
explicitly witnesses. St. Epiphanius (died 403) asks: "How could
Mary fail to be heir in her flesh to the kingdom of heaven, She who
has not known . . . any uncleanness, but remained immaculate."

John of Thessalonica, in the first half of the seventh century, wrote
in the epilogue of the account of the dormition of Mary: "The Apos-
tles placed the precious body of the most glorious Lady, Mother
of God and always Virgin Mary, in the new tomb which the Savior had indicated to them. They remained there three days to guard it. But after the third day, having opened the place to venerate the precious tabernacle of her who is worthy of all praise, they found only the winding sheets, inasmuch as by Christ God, incarnate in her womb, she was transported to the eternal inheritance.”

In the prologue of The Eulogy of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God, attributed to St. Modestus of Jerusalem (died 634) the author, after having stated that it is impossible to speak adequately of Mary because she as Mother of God constitutes a prodigy which surpasses human and angelic intelligence, pursues his exposition in these terms: “As most glorious Mother of Christ our Savior, dispenser of life and of immortality, she is vivified by Him and rendered participant of eternal incorruption. He raised her from the sepulcher and assumed her to Himself in a manner which He alone knows . . . Christ, who is God, took from this perpetual Virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit, a flesh endowed with soul and mind; He called her to Himself, and clothed her with corporal incorruptibility after His own likeness, and glorified her ineffably so that she who is His Mother might be His heir, according to the Psalmist’s song: “At Thy right stands the Queen in vesture of gold, with variety of ornaments.”

St. Germain of Constantinople (died 733) has this elevated apostrophe to the Most Holy Virgin: “According to what has been written, you appear in beauty, and thy virginal body is all holy, all chaste, the dwelling of God; so that consequently thou art immune from returning to dust; transformed, insofar as is humanly possible, into the lofty life of incorruptibility; yet it is ever the same; living now and wonderously glorified and made safe from all harm, and made free for the perfect life.”

With what eloquence this truth is expressed by St. John Damascene, the most outstanding witness of the tradition of the Assumption of the Mother of God. Considering the bodily Assumption of the Mother of God in the light of her other privileges, this great Doctor exclaims: “It was necessary that she who in birth had preserved her virginity intact, should also conserve without any corruption, her body after death. It was necessary that she who had carried in her womb the Creator become a child, should dwell in the divine tabernacles. It was necessary that the spouse of the Father should dwell in celestial bridal chambers. It was necessary that she who had seen her Son on the cross, receiving in her heart that sword of sorrow from which she
had been immune while giving Him birth, should contemplate Him sitting at the right hand of the Father. It was necessary that the Mother of God should possess that which belongs to the Son and should be honored by all creatures as the Mother and handmaid of God."

And the theology of succeeding centuries, both of the East and West, but reechoes and renders more weighty the voice of past centuries by introducing still other considerations based on Scripture and the Fathers, which claimed that the divine maternity, the maternal virginity, the exalted sanctity of the Virgin demanded necessarily that Christ, omnipotent God and Son of Mary, should not permit that the body of the Virgin which had been His tabernacle in the Incarnation should be corrupted and given to worms.

"Sentire non valeo," "Cogitare non possum," "Horrent aures meae"—these and similar expressions are found in the writings of St. Bernardine of Siena, St. Robert Bellarmine, St. Francis of Sales, St. Alphonsus Liguori. It is their opinion that it is not possible to think or imagine that the immaculate body of Mary should be the prey of corruption. It must rather be glorified in heaven by the Most Holy Trinity with Whom the Virgin Mother has a special relationship.

Since Mary's glorification is implicitly contained in the other privileges defined by the first councils, and has been progressively clarified down through the centuries, I do not consider it out of place to point to the splendid illustration of these truths by Bossuet in his first sermon on the Assumption.

In speaking of the virginal purity of Mary, with his accustomed profundity of thought, sublimity of style and insuperable eloquence, Bossuet concludes with this tribute to her bodily glorification: "The sacred body of Mary, throne of chastity, temple of the Incarnate Wisdom, and seat of the power of the Most High, was not able to remain long in the tomb; the triumph of Mary would have been imperfect if it had been accomplished without her holy flesh, which was as the source of her glory. Come and admire the beauty of this virginal flesh and contemplate the three marvels which holy virginity works in her, preserving the body from corruption, reviving it with an anticipated resurrection and diffusing upon it a divine light of glorification."

The holy virginity, as a celestial balm, preserves the body of Mary from corruption. Jesus Christ our Lord, Spouse of Virgins, wishing to unite himself so intimately according to the flesh, to the Most Holy Virgin, rendered her totally like to Himself.
Hence no one can equal the purity of this singular Virgin and Mother endowed with perfect integrity of mind and of body, in whom the most special grace has not only tempered as in the other elect, the fire of concupiscence, but has likewise extinguished the brazier, the "fomes peccati" that is, the more profound root and the most intimate cause of evil, the principle of corruption.

"Since," continues the great orator, "the corruption of body, which science attributes to its composition, is actually due, according to evangelical principles, to the fact that it is a flesh of sin (caro peccati the Apostle says), such flesh, irregularly by concupiscence, ought to be destroyed, even in the elect, so that it might be remade by God according to the primitive plan of creation."

It follows that it is necessary for our body to be reduced to dust, because it has served sin; as it has not merited to be joined to a blessed soul, neither is it worthy to enter the kingdom of heaven; and it follows likewise that the flesh of Mary being all pure was to receive immortality by means of an anticipated resurrection. As the sun, which producing the fruits in their season, anticipates its benign influence through any well-cultivated land and produces precocious fruits, so the holy flesh of Mary attracts a special influence of the divine Sun to produce anticipated fruits of immortality.

It is certain that Mary's singular purity can attract the vivifying power of Jesus, since it drew to Mary Jesus Himself, who descended to this flesh of Mary, attracted by her purity. He has loved this flesh even to the point of enclosing Himself in it for nine months, incorporating Himself within it, taking root in it. As Tertullian says, "In utero radicem egit." Jesus will then not leave in the tomb this flesh which He has so much loved, but will transport it to heaven, adorn it with immortal glory.

It is holy virginity which will give to the body of Mary this dwelling of glory. The gospel presents the glory of the resurrected, saying that they will be as the angels of God: "Erunt sicut angeli Dei." And Tertullian calls the resurrected flesh an angelized flesh (angelificata caro). Now, it is virginity which makes men angels, already in this life, and it contributes in a special way to the glory of resurrected bodies.

"Judge, Christians," concludes Bossuet, "with what light the resurrected body of Mary will be clothed, she who through her virginal purity, surpasses the Seraphim themselves!"

Holy Scripture seeks out singular and extraordinary expressions
with the purpose of representing such magnificent splendor; it has attempted to unite all that is luminous in nature. Hence Holy Writ has put the moon under the feet of Mary and the stars around her head. The sun penetrates the rest of her body, envelops it, and immerses it in light. “Mulier amicta sole.” So much glory and splendor was necessary to adorn this virginal body!

Summarizing what has been said, it appears evident that the bodily assumption of the Most Holy Mary, Mother of God into heaven, is a truth contained implicitly in the deposit of revelation, implicitly affirmed in the first councils; like other truths it has been so clarified with the assistance of the Holy Spirit Who dwells perennially in the Church of Christ, and under the guidance of the living and authentic magisterium of the Church, the supreme and infallible teacher of faith has judged that the moment has arrived for satisfying the fervent wishes and desires of the sons of the Church who with innumerable petitions requested that he adorn the virginal forehead of the Mother of God with this shining diadem.

To our harassed epoch Divine Providence reserved this dogmatic definition to open, so to say, a luminous fringe of heaven to humanity which seems to desire only the earth and which feels itself crushed under the weight of machines and brute force.

In the semipublic consistory of Oct. 30, 1950, the Sovereign Pontiff announcing to the Sacred College and to the Episcopacy his decision to proceed with the proclamation, said, “There is question of an event which will certainly culminate in an infinite joy for us, for you, and for the entire Catholic world.” He then pointed out that to the most powerful patronage of the glorious Virgin had been entrusted “the defense of the Catholic Church which in not a few parts of the world either is little known or stricken by false accusations and calumnies or oppressed by wicked persecutions; she desires to lead back the erring and those gone astray to the unity of the Church.”

And in the sublime discourse pronounced in the Piazza of St. Peter after the proclamation of the dogma, Pius XII alluding to the outburst of joy and to the acclamations of the faithful reunited there, said, “The exultant, uncontainable joy of centuries is yours. It bursts out today in the huge expanse of this venerated place . . . As though unsettled by your heart beats and by the trembling of your lips, the stones themselves of this patriarchal basilica vibrate and with them, it appears, the innumerable old temples raised up everywhere in honor of the Assumed, monuments of a unique faith and terrestrial pedestals of the celestial throne of glory of the Queen of the Universe.”
While we assisted at these most solemn acts of the life of the Church and listened to their commentary in the august, sublime, moving word of the Pope, our thought winged its way to the people of the Christian East, separated from the Apostolic See, and to its innumerable old temples, raised up in honor of the Assumed (To the Assumed is also dedicated the church of the Kremlin: happy auspice!) They have also rejoiced, and their stones have vibrated with those of the basilica which contains the glorious remains of the Prince of the Apostles! The day will come when the minds and hearts of those beloved people who have gone astray will rejoice and vibrate in unison in the restored union with the one Church of Christ, founded by Peter. Everything which now falls on those lands in our terrible and tragic times prepares a new exuberant spring for the Church.

It is for us to hasten that glorious day with a luminous vision of the Church, mystical body of Christ, with study and love of her, above every provincialism and nationalism. Let us hasten that day with a christian and sacerdotal life profoundly impregnated with this apostolic intention and with a persevering and trusting prayer.

"Certainly," writes Pope Pius XII in the encyclical Sempiternus Rex, for the commemoration of the 15th centenary of the Council of Chalcedon, "let us not ignore the fact that an old accumulation of prejudices tenaciously impedes the realization of the prayer addressed by Christ to the Eternal Father for the followers of the Gospel at the last Supper: That they all may be one. But we know that the force of prayer is so great that if those praying are united and possess an ardent secure faith, coupled with a pure conscience, they can even move a mountain."

On the vigil of this first anniversary of the dogmatic definition of the Assumption, let us place before the throne of the August Pontiff sentiments of most profound gratitude for the most precious gem with which the virginal forehead of the Queen of Heaven has been adorned, and likewise that of the Church. We express also our ardent wish that like the Pope of the Immaculate, the angelic Pius IX, so too the Pope of the Assumed, Pius XII, Pastor Angelicus, may surpass the years of Peter, and know new triumphs, for the glory of Christ, King of nations, above all in the return of the people to the unity of the Church, through the auspices of the most glorious Queen of heaven.
MARY'S PLACE IN OUR LIFE—T. J. Jorgensen, S.J.

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3. LITANY FOR OUR TIMES—Robert L. Reynolds

4. MARY AND THE APOSTOLATE—Emil Neubert, S.M.

5. THE IMITATION OF MARY—Placid Houall, S.M.

6. MARY, ASSUMED INTO HEAVEN—Lawrence Everett, C.S.S.R.

7. FATIMA—IN BATTLE ARRAY—Joseph Agius, O.F.P.

8. MARY, CONCEIVED WITHOUT SIN—Francis Connell, C.S.S.R.

9. RUSSIA AND THE IMMACULATE HEART—Pius XII

10. MARY, OUR INSPIRATION TO ACTION—Robert Smale, S.M.

11. THE SOUL OF MARIAN DEVOTION—Emidius Baumgartner, S.M.

12. MOTHER AND HELPMATE OF CHRIST—James Egan, O.P.


14. MARY, OUR SPIRITUAL MOTHER—William G. Merton, O.C.S.O.

15. MARY, PATRONESS OF CATHOLIC ACTION—John J. Griffin

16. THE MYSTERY OF MARY—Emil Neubert, S.M.

17. THE BLESSED VIRGIN IN THE LITURGY—Chalres Howell, S.J.

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19. THE WITNESS OF OUR LADY—Archbishop Alan Goodier, S.J.


21. THE WITNESS OF OUR LADY—Archbishop Alan Goodier, S.J.

22. MARY'S APOTHEOSIS IN HISTORY—John Totten, S.M.

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25. IMMACULATE MOTHER OF GOD—James Egan, O.P.


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