

## THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST AND OUR MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP - Anthony Kelly, CSsR

The intensity, breadth and variety of practices of devotion to Mary, the Mother of Perpetual Help, demands that we pay attention to the deep experience of faith and receive it on its own terms. Faith comes to us carrying the full weight and depth of the whole Christian mystery as it draws on the dynamics of that great event— “in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19).

### *The Integral Mystery*

At every point, faith is a matter of letting in the light and atmosphere of a new creation through the windows that open in the light and darkness of our world. Just as the risen Jesus entered the locked rooms to the surprise of his fearful disciples, he has not stopped coming; nor, for that matter, has he ceased to give us Mary as our mother. The light of Christ, the fresh air of his Spirit, and the maternal presence of Mary permeate the experience of Catholic faith. John’s Gospel concludes with a healthy reminder, that the works of the crucified and risen Jesus cannot be contained within the linear print of any book –or of all the books of the world (Jn 21:25). By implication, all the gifts of God elude our comprehension, including the work of the Spirit and the maternal presence of Mary.

On the other hand, the mysteries of God’s grace inspire ever fresh attempts to come to some kind of fresh comprehension of what most nourishes the life of faith and health of the Church. It is not a matter of adding one consideration to another, in an ever increasing list of topics, or—for that matter—to invoke Mary with an endless lists of titles and to visit places associated with her apparitions, recent or in times past. The concentrated point of faith in Jesus, crucified, risen and ascended, sheds unfailing light on Mary’s role, in the Church and beyond it, just as it leads to a deeper understanding of who she is, what she does and her manner of bringing home to believers of every age the Gospel of grace.

### *Mary Assumed*

Consider for instance the Catholic dogma of the Assumption of Our Lady, solemnly defined in 1950. In this dogmatic definition, the conviction of faith hurried beyond its powers of expression. If Mary is declared to be assumed, body and soul, into heaven, then the corporate, historical authority of the Catholic Church is thereby engaged. It is committed to a view of corporeality, physicality and interpersonal communication in ways that are largely beyond our powers of expression.

The worst thing we can do is to let this Marian doctrine become isolated. For that reason, it is worth noting that in the development of Catholic tradition, the ascension of Jesus and the Assumption go together. In the mystery of salvation, the Ascension of Jesus<sup>1</sup> is connected to the Assumption of Mary as cause to effect. Likewise, the Assumption, as an effect of Ascension of Christ, has a deep ecclesiological and cosmic significance. It tells us something about the future of the Church, and even implies a present transformation of the cosmos.

### *Incarnation*

With the ascension of Jesus and the assumption of Mary, faith stretches forward and upward. Ambrose of Milan expressed the cosmic sweep of the mystery of Christ with the words, "In Christ's resurrection, the world arose. In Christ's resurrection, the heavens arose; in Christ's resurrection the earth itself arose".<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the ascension is the completion and expansion of incarnation. It enables us to glimpse the connections between the incarnation, the ascension and the universal transformation anticipated in the Catholic doctrine of Mary "assumed body and soul into heaven". Indeed, the assumption of Mary is a concrete symbol of the overbrimming significance of the ascension itself. Now assumed into the glory of Christ, she is the anticipation of the heaven of a transfigured creation.<sup>3</sup> In that regard, Mary is the paradigmatic instance of creation open to, collaborating with, and transformed by, the creative mystery of God in Christ. As the Mother of Christ, she symbolises the generativity of creation under the power of the Spirit. In her, as the Advent antiphon has it, "the earth has been opened to bud forth the Saviour".

In its confession of the Assumption, Christian hope finds a particular confirmation.<sup>4</sup> In Mary, now assumed body and soul into the heaven of God and Christ, our humanity, our world and even our history have reached their divinely-destined term. She embodies the reality of our world as having received into itself the mystery that is to transform the universe in its entirety. The seer of the Apocalypse invites his readers to share the vision of "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:1-3). Such a vision nourishes faith in the Son who uniquely descended from on high, and faith in Mary's assumption as the New Eve and her place in the new creation. In Mary's Assumption, our world is diaphanous to the glory of God, an aspect of the great cosmic marriage that is already taking place.

The Spirit has brought forth in her the particular beauty of creation as God sees it. In her, human history has come to its maturity. The world has reached its age of consent as it surrenders to the transcendent love for which it was destined. Out of such a union, the whole Christ of a transfigured creation is born. Thus, while the focus of Christian hope is in Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, there is a *reprise* of the paschal mystery in the assumption of Mary into heaven. The gift of Christ's transforming grace has already been received and attained its transforming effect. The ascended Christ has conformed Mary to himself. She embodies receptivity to the gift of God—who "has raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6-7).

### *The Presence of Mary*

Assumed into the heaven of her Son's ascension, Mary is no longer subject to the rule of death (1 Cor 15:42-58). Her transformed existence is no longer enclosed in the flat physicality of a world ignorant of the resurrection and the ascension of the crucified One. United to Christ, Mary lives and acts, and continues to act, as the Mother of the Church. In the heaven of Christ, her intercessory prayer and compassionate involvement has a measureless influence. Invoked as Mother of the Church, Mother of Perpetual Help, Our Lady Help of Christians, Mother of Mercy, Our Lady of Guadalupe (indeed, in all the invocations of the Litany of Loreto, and more). She is present to all in the divine realm of endless life and love.

Mary of Nazareth is the name of an historical person – the Mother of Jesus. Yet history has no record of her life except through the documents of faith, above all the Gospels of the New Testament. It is significant, however, that she has become known to faith only through the immense transformation that took place in the resurrection and ascension of her Son, and its impact on human consciousness through faith, hope and love.<sup>5</sup> Her Assumption enables faith to glimpse the “opened heaven” that Jesus promised to the disciples in his conversation with Nathanael: “Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:51). Her Son embodies the “open heaven” of communication between God and creation. And, in Mary, the effects of that communication are anticipated in way appropriate to her vocation as Mother of whole Christ, head and members.

### *A Marian Vision*

This is to say that the salvific effect of the resurrection and ascension of the crucified Christ comes home to the life of faith in and through the Assumption of Mary—and this is determining feature of Catholic ecclesial experience and tradition. In this respect, not to mention the role of Mary would leave the Father’s exaltation of Jesus without its more personal effect. Furthermore, if the assumption of Mary is left disconnected from the resurrection and ascension of Christ, it can quickly become a devotional “optional extra”, and ceases to be an anticipation of the universal and cosmic transformation of all creation in Christ. On the other hand, in the light of the ascension in which the presence and activity of Christ is viewed, belief in the Assumption of the Mother of Christ, body and soul, into heaven cannot but continue to inspire a fresh hearing of this exhortation from the Letter to the Ephesians,

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you will be revealed with him in glory (Eph 3:1-4).

The power of the resurrection has overflowed into Mary, body and soul, and in all her relationships. She is the pre-eminent believer, open to the transforming power of Christ’s love in every fibre of her being. In and through him, her special mission in the Church is realised. In her union with her Son, ‘the resurrection and the life’ (John 11:25), she shapes faith into a radical, defiant and all-inclusive hope: ‘If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died’ (1 Cor 15:19). Through the power of the resurrection, Mary lives and acts, for God is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Mt 22:32). In intercession and compassionate involvement, she lives and acts, and continues to act in every life and in every generation, from the heart of the Father’s love and mercy: ‘Surely, from now on, all the generations that call me blessed’ (Luke 1:48). Invoked as the Mother of Perpetual Help, she comes to us from in the realm of endless life with God. She anchors faith, inspires hope, and exemplifies the ‘love [that] never ends’ (1 Cor 13:8). Assumed into heaven, she is the New Eve, the Mother of all the living: ‘Woman, behold, your son’ (John 19:28).

Mary of Nazareth is the name of an historical person – the Mother of Jesus. Yet history has no record of her life except through the documents of faith, above all the Gospels of the New Testament. She has become known to faith only through the immense transformation that affected human consciousness in the resurrection of her Son and inspired the writing of the Gospels.

### *Mary and the Church*

Despite the jumbled community of saints and sinners which makes up the Church, the creed confesses the Church as holy. For the Church is fundamentally holy only because God is holy. At the depths of its life, the Church inhales and breathes forth the Holy Breath of the Father and the Son. Such holiness does not fail: it is the inexhaustible source of the Church's grace lived in the inspired company of Mary and all the "holy ones", the saints, whose influence precedes, accompanies, sustains and enriches the often sorry efforts of the Church in any era.

This brief reflection has sought to underline the intrinsic connection of Mary to the whole mystery of Christ. In whatever direction one looks, Mary intensifies the light of faith.<sup>6</sup> The primordial love of the Father is brought home to faith in the tenderness and generosity of Mary's maternal initiative: "be it done unto me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). The self-giving love of the Father sending the Son into the world finds its parallel in Mary, this mother offering her Son, as she stands at the foot of the cross. The Spirit that is poured out on Mary and the Beloved disciple from the cross (Jn 19:30) continues to be manifest Mary, the mother of the Church, and in her loving care for all the faithful. The victory of love in the resurrection is further revealed in the Assumption of Mary into heaven. In life and in death, in all our joys and sufferings, the love of the Holy Trinity for all the world is given the face of a woman and the heart of a mother in our Lady of Perpetual Help.

In Mary, the communion of saints is an all-encompassing and living reality:

But you have come to Mount Zion and the City of the Living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:18-24).

And in that gathering, in order to enjoy all the graces of God, believers approach Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

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<sup>1</sup> See Anthony Kelly, CSsR, *Upward: Faith, Church and the Ascension of Christ* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), especially pages 153-156.

<sup>2</sup> Ambrose of Milan, *De excessu fratris sui*, bk 1. PL 16, 1354.

<sup>3</sup> See Karl Rahner, 'The Interpretation of the Dogma of the Assumption', *Theological Investigations I*, trans. C. Ernst (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 215-227.

<sup>4</sup> For a more expanded treatment of these points, see Anthony Kelly, CSsR, "Mary: Icon of Trinitarian Love", *Australian EJournal of Theology* 14, March 2009. 1-35.

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Kelly, CSsR, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> For this "holographic" view, see Anthony Kelly, CSsR, *God is Love: the Heart of Christian Faith* (Collegeville, NY: Liturgical, 2012)