

When Pope Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's Assumption in 1950, World War II was a recent memory. The Holocaust had broken the human spirit. Artists painted pictures of hopelessness. The pope delivered to that world the good news of Mary's assumption.

The dogma expresses our Catholic belief that Mary was taken body and soul into heaven at the end of her days. We believe that the risen Christ has opened heaven to all believers. And we believe that Mary already dwells with Christ in heaven.

This belief is fairly unique to our church. A lot of other Christian churches do not accept the assumption of Mary. Many of them even object to it because it is not in the bible. Pope Pius XII argued differently. Nowhere in the bible does it say that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven. But the bible affirms the resurrection and the holiness of Mary's life. St. Paul says, "Just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life." He also says that what is mortal will clothe itself with immortality. And, of course, when Gabriel visits Mary at the annunciation, the angel calls her "full of grace." Pius XII says the assumption of Mary can be deduced from passages like these. The resurrection is possible because Christ makes it so. And if Mary was full of grace, she has to enjoy the resurrection with Christ.

The dogma of the assumption also connects sin and death. Human beings sin. We are not perfect. Because we are imperfect, we also die. Sin accompanies us in life, and death follows naturally at the end. Jesus, however, was free from sin throughout his life, and though he died, he did not suffer the consequences. He rose from the dead. We believe that Mary, too, was without sin from the moment of her conception. Since she lived without sin, she did not suffer the consequences of death.

There has always been some disagreement among Christians whether or not Mary actually died. In the Eastern Rite churches, people speak about the "dormition" of Mary; that is, they believe she fell asleep at the end of her days, but that she was taken body and soul into heaven without having died. Our tradition holds Mary died as any human being does. But Pope Pius said Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven "when she completed the course of her earthly life." So he never really said who was right or wrong on the question of Mary's death.

In the end, all that matters is our belief in resurrection. The terrorism and violence that fill our world make us anxious as people were after World War II. In the 1950s we feared the imminent use of nuclear weapons, and that fear has returned. The world might think there is no hope for humanity, but there is, no matter what violence or evil touches our families or our country. Mary was taken body and soul into heaven. And Christ promises the same bright future for those who are faithful to the gospel.