

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

“Blessed” is a title that we give the Virgin Mary. The main reason is that her kinswoman Elizabeth greeted her that way when she was pregnant with John the Baptist and when Mary was pregnant with Jesus. Elizabeth said, “Blessed are you among women.” She knew there was something special about the child in Mary’s womb: The unborn John had just leapt for joy inside Elizabeth’s womb, so she continued, “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.” None of us will ever be blessed as Mary was to become the mother of Jesus, but any of us can be blessed as Mary was to become one who believed that the Lord fulfills promises.

Decades after that Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, when the adult Jesus was speaking to a crowd one day, an unnamed woman raised her voice. She spoke to Jesus, but she spoke about Mary. She also called Mary blessed, saying to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.” Elizabeth had said to Mary, “Blessed is the fruit of your womb,” but this woman noted how blessed Mary was in the bearing of Jesus: “Blessed is the womb... [blessed are] the breasts.” Now, Jesus deflected this in a surprising way for someone who surely loved his mother the way that we love his mother. He said, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.” We see the same contrast here. We could never be blessed as Mary was when she held Jesus in her womb and nursed him at her breasts. But any of us can be blessed as Mary was if we hear the word of God and observe it.

The Catholic Church celebrates the solemnity of the Assumption of Mary each year on August 15. It is a holyday of obligation in the United States. This year it falls on a Sunday, making it easier for people to enjoy. The bible does not tell us about the end of Mary’s life. Our belief is that God assumed her body and soul into heaven. The main reason for that is the way the angel Gabriel greeted Mary at the beginning of her story with the words, “Hail, favored one!” or as we like to say it, “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.” If Mary was truly full of grace, that preserved her from two aspects of her humanity that the rest of us have to face every day: sin and death.

Our belief that Mary, full of grace, therefore had no sin is enshrined in the words that are also the name of this cathedral: the immaculate conception. Not only did she live each day full of grace, but she was spared from original sin: she was immaculate from the moment of her conception. Our belief that Mary, full of grace, therefore did not experience death as we do is enshrined in the name of today’s feast, the assumption. She lived each day full of grace, and she passed through death full of grace: Spared in life from the corruption of her soul, she was spared in death from the corruption of her body.

We cannot be blessed as Mary in the way she was conceived or in the way she did conceive Jesus the Son of God. But any of us can be blessed as Mary in other ways. Do you believe that the Lord fulfills his promises to you? Do you hear the word of God? Do you observe the word of God that you hear? No? Well, try it. Trust in the promises of the Lord. Listen for the word of the Lord. Do the word of the Lord. Then, like Mary, people will rightly call you, “blessed”.

Sunday, August 15, 2021