

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

On board the Titanic in 1912 was the 32-year old Irish Jesuit and photographer, Francis Browne. His uncle had purchased him a ticket to travel on the maiden voyage from Southampton, England, as far as Queenstown, Ireland. Unaware of the tragedy that awaited that vessel, he took photos that have become part of history. He also befriended an American couple who offered to pay for the Jesuit to go all the way to New York and back. Brother Francis, out of obedience, telegraphed his superior, asking permission. He received a four-word telegram in return, all in capital letters: GET OFF THAT SHIP. So he did. He died 48 years later in Dublin. To this day religious orders of priests, brothers and sisters can use that story to show the importance of holy obedience.

The greatest exemplar of holy obedience was, of course, the Blessed Virgin Mary, who, upon the invitation of the angel Gabriel, got off the ship of her everyday life and agreed to let her future unfold according to God's will. Today we celebrate throughout the Catholic Church the full reward of her obedient life, her assumption, body and soul, into the kingdom of heaven. Where she has gone we hope to follow.

Our best way forward is also through holy obedience to what God asks. We Americans especially find this very hard. When we accomplish great things, we stir up our pride, and we come to trust greatly in ourselves alone. We resist the requests of some in authority: parents, teachers, supervisors, doctors, and even the guidance of a spouse or a friend. We may even resist what in our prayer we discern God wants us to do. As Brother Francis experienced, our ship looks beautiful, our horizon exciting, and our company inviting. We may even ask God, our religious superior, if we may keep doing what we're doing. God may have another plan in mind. Unlike Brother Francis, we do not always obey.

For our responsorial today the lectionary turns to Psalm 45, which it frequently does on days that celebrate the life of Jesus' mother. Originally a wedding hymn about a royal bride and groom, it paints several visually striking verses that seem to foreshadow the Assumption of Mary. Our cantor addresses the bride, as if these words were addressed to Mary, whose beauty became even more attractive at the end of her life: "Listen, O daughter; pay heed and give ear: forget your own people and your father's house. So will the king desire your beauty. He is your lord, pay homage to him." Then describing the scene of the royal wedding, the cantor sings of the bride and her companions, "They are escorted amid gladness and joy; they pass within the palace of the king." We joined in the refrain, addressing God our king, "The queen [Mary] stands at your right hand, arrayed in gold." Mary's holy obedience led to garments of gold.

We never know what God has in store when we discern his will. Obedience often requires sacrifice and humility. Often we have to overcome our own resistance. Our obedient response may provide a greater good for others, and it may provide a greater good for us. It often demands being ready to get off the ship of personal pride so that God can do more with our lives. God loves each of us the way a groom loves his bride, and, when we obey his will, he will clothe us in garments of gold.