

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
(1Co 15:20-26 / Luke 1:39-56)  
15.08.2014

Today we read the Visitation gospel which speaks to us of the joy brought to Elizabeth and the child she carried in her womb when they received the visit of Mary and the Christ-child she bore within her.

When I read this gospel passage I found myself thinking back to the summer of 1981 and incidents associated with this feast that year: blessings in my life, sources of joy, even in the midst of suffering.

I had spent the summer months of that year confined to my room. Most of that time I was stretched out on my bed, too weak to get up, floored by illness.

It was really quite frustrating to find myself in such a weakened state.

I had to have it proven to me more than once in the course of those very long weeks that I hadn't the strength to walk along the corridors of the monastery to get down to the church for the liturgy.

At one point my next door neighbour heard me trying to convince the infirmarian and novice-master in no uncertain terms that I thought I had enough strength to get up and do this when I hadn't in fact.

The doctor had ordered complete rest, so I wasn't allowed visitors. This meant that my confrere couldn't come into my room to console me. Moved by compassion he communicated his thoughts of solidarity by way of a little typed message which he left at door of my room for the infirmarian to bring in to me.

I have kept the message precious ever since.

It reads: *In patientia vestra possidebitis animas vestras.*

Those are words of a Latin antiphon found in the Antiphonary for the feast of an apostle.

They could be translated: *By your patient endurance you will win your life.*

I need to be reminded of those words regularly in my life and I suspect all of us need to hear the essence of their message on occasion.

At times we all need to be encouraged to *hold in there* through thick and thin.

I am sure, just like us, Mary needed encouragement at various points on her life journey. In her life, as in ours, there were times when the going was tough. This would have left her, as it leaves us, feeling quite vulnerable.

We do Mary and we do ourselves no favours by imagining that she journeyed through life as a kind of plaster-cast saint, feeling no pain, experiencing no struggle, devoid of issues to be grappled with, without difficulties that needed to be worked through.

Clearly, Mary's *yes* at the Annunciation implied saying *no* to many other things in life. On many occasions she surely felt the pain involved with the *no* she had to say to herself because of her *yes* to God.

Mary's *yes* had to be repeated at different steps along the way. I imagine that sometimes this left Mary feeling just as bewildered as on that initial day when the angel had visited her and she consented to God's will in her life.

As was the case at the Annunciation, Mary probably didn't understand all that was asked of her as time progressed. At each stage along the way she must have questioned: *how will what God is asking of me come about?*

Just think of that moment when she wanted to call a halt to Jesus' itinerant ministry, seeing all that it demanded of Him and of her who loved Him. At that moment, what Jesus was doing, His way of being, appeared to Mary as utter folly.

Or again, think of the *yes* she had to live on Calvary's Hill.

Let us linger at Calvary for just a moment.

Jesus' words spoken upon the cross encourage us to look to Mary to learn from her example: *Ecce mater tua, Behold your mother.*

When we look at Mary, what do we see?

Do we not see that Mary, whom we celebrate today in the mystery of her Assumption, could only be led to ascend with Christ because she had shared in His descent?

The Scriptures are clear. There is no other way to glory and honour with Christ than accepting to enter into His self-emptying humility.

What we see when we behold Mary is that, whatever trials came her way, she held firm. She was faithful throughout her life which was certainly not without its challenges. She remained steadfast in hope and in love through all she traversed, and not least in the sombre moments she went through, including that moment of ultimate darkness and excruciating pain, when, standing by the cross, she saw Love refused, rejected and crucified before her very eyes.

Along with the reminder of the call to *patiently endure* which came in that little note I received in 1981, another memory associated with today's feast from that same year also comes to mind.

During my weeks of illness the abbot came to me several times a day to manifest his care and concern. Each time he would bless me. During those weeks we grew much in mutual knowledge and respect. I really came to appreciate the great kindness and profound fatherly love the Abbot exuded.

I still remember how to help me overcome the frustration and sadness of not being to attend the community liturgy he surprised me (and not only me, but also the novice-master and infirmarian) by coming to celebrate Eucharist in my room. He did this on several occasions. I can still see him arrive to my room on the evening of the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, carrying the chalice and paten he used for the Eucharistic celebration

The Eucharist shared that evening was a *visitation moment*. It brought Christ present to me and gave me great joy. It served to help me come to a better appreciation of the mystery of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary which, if I am honest, I would have to admit was a mystery I had struggled with hitherto. (It took another Eucharistic Vigil a year later to help me fully grasp the real significance of this mystery.)

That Eucharistic celebration of 1981 and the little note of encouragement already referred to were and remain significant to me. They will always be for me signs of God's presence by my side, signs of God reaching out to me, at a time of vulnerability and weakness.

Such channels of real grace (often very simple in themselves) are what the psalmist calls *a sign of God's favour*.

Such signs are given to us most often when we feel ourselves to be truly poor and really needy.

If the incidents I have recalled come back to my mind this year, it is no doubt because I need to reconnect today with the graces of encouragement they brought me then.

We all need to be regularly encouraged to take heart and renew our trust in the Lord.

We need to be constantly reminded to *hang in there* through thick and thin.

Over and over again, we need to hear the call to endure, in the sure and certain hope, and even in the sure and certain knowledge, that *the Lord is with us* and *our endurance will win us our lives*.

It is comforting, helpful and energising for us to reconnect in the present with the Lord's blessings upon us in the past.

This remembering helps to *re-member* our lives. It helps to put us back together again. It is an especially important exercise at difficult moments on life's journey when we feel as if our lives are falling apart.

If I share with you the memories evoked for me today, it is not simply out of personal nostalgia, but because I believe their essential message can speak to all of us who are gathered here this morning to celebrate today's great feast.

What we are given to celebrate in commemorating the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is expressed so eloquently in the *Magnificat*.

The message of the Mary's *Magnificat* (today's gospel) is not only that *the Lord has done great things*, but that He is doing and will continue to do great things for His people, for each one of us.

I think we can read the *Magnificat* and understand the mystery we celebrate as an invitation to trust in the Lord to do for us what He has done for Mary.

The *Magnificat* assures us that *the Lord has looked upon the lowliness of His servant*.

The Lord looks upon not only His lowly handmaid Mary; He looks upon the lowliness of all His servants, ourselves included.

The Lord will do *great things for us!*

He does great things for us *out of mercy, from one generation to the next*.

God acts in our favour, out of His graciousness.

What the Lord shows us and bestows upon us over and over again is His unmerited loving-kindness.

The greatest thing the Lord will do eventually is to lead us to share in His own Risen life!

This is what Mary's being assumed into heaven is all about. It is about her having come to share in the life of her Risen Son.

It is in this way that the mystery of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is best understood: as a prophecy of humanity's call to share in God's own life.

Our Orthodox brothers and sisters do not shy away from talking in terms of our having been called to *divinisation*: to be made one with God, our coming to share in His own life.

The two memories associated with this feast which came back to me serve to remind me of the itinerary we all need to follow to arrive at the end to which we are called: life with God.

They remind us that the path to *divinisation* is through perseverance and through courageously following the itinerary the Eucharist indicates to us: that of self-giving love.

The way we must follow as Christians is the paschal way: an itinerary which leads us through the cross to the resurrection.

This paschal way is a path to be walked with *a noble and generous heart*; one in which we are totally given in an unreserved self-offering and genuine openness to God's will.

There are those who would question the strange dogma of the Assumption.

(I think we must concede that their questioning is understandable. After all, there is no direct biblical foundation for this dogma. The absence of direct biblical foundation makes it totally

unacceptable to the vast majority of Protestants, though there are some who understand its significance.)

Some (including many Catholics who have apparently no problem with the dogma of the Assumption) nonetheless get it wrong by imagining that when it is said that *Mary was assumed into heaven* it is being claimed that she did not die.

The dogma of the Assumption does not say that Mary did not die!

Mary died!

If Jesus died to live His *pascha*, Mary also had to die to live hers.

What the dogma of the Assumption affirms is that *Mary was taken entirely up into heaven*: that is to say, *to be with the Lord*, that *she was taken up body and soul*.

To say *Mary was taken up body and soul* is to say that everything in Mary's life was assumed into life with God.

What is believed to have happened for Mary, all Christians who recite the Creed profess belief will happen for them.

In the Creed we profess faith in the resurrection of our entire being into the life of God.

The Orthodox talk of Mary's death in terms of her having *fallen asleep*; they speak of her *Dormition*.

Mary *fell asleep in the Lord* by her death and immediately *passed over* into Christ's risen life.

In all Mary's life, including her Assumption, she is presented to us as *a sure sign of hope for God's people*. This is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in the document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

To quote yet another insight of Vatican II, Mary is presented to us as *the most excellent fruit of the redemption (...) a model of what the Church hopes to be*.

The trajectory of Mary's life then is representative of what will happen for all humanity when all will taken up with Christ.

The Assumption is there to tell us that all will end in glory.

Everything will be transformed, including the rough and difficult passages in our lives.

The words Jesus spoke to the Emmaus pilgrims (which were spoken to help them make sense out the suffering, loss and pain they endured because of Christ's passion) are spoken to us to help us through the difficult passages we all traverse inevitably: *Was it necessary for the Christ to suffer and so enter into His glory?*

Jesus' words there show us that there is no escaping pain in this life if we dare to live it as we should: *in Christ*, which really means *in love*.

At those times when we are suffering, we must cling to that message of exhortation that I hear echoed in my heart in this year's celebration of the Assumption: *By your patient endurance you will win your life*.

We will come through as long as we remain *in Christ, in love*.

The Lord comes to us in this Eucharist, just as He does in every Eucharist. He comes to assure us not only of His proximity, but to make His home within us.

To participate in the Eucharist is to receive Christ in us so that we may be *in Christ*. It is to be united in that most beautiful communion: *in love*.

Participation in the Eucharist makes of us what tradition says the Lord made of Mary when He took flesh within her.

Reception of Holy Communion makes of us an *ark of the covenant*.

We are given to carry Christ, God's own love, within us.

The Lord's life within us gives us courage and strength; it brings us consolation and peace.

Wherever we are at in our lives today, whatever is going on deep down within us, let us welcome the Lord's encouragement and the blessing of joy and peace that comes with His visit in this Eucharist.

May the Lord's coming to us here fill our hearts with that warmth of love the Emmaus pilgrims felt burning within them when The Risen Lord drew alongside them with His words of comfort and revealed Himself to them at the *Breaking of Bread*.

Amen!