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Homily for the Feast of the Assumption

A homily by Saint Josemaria published in "Christ is Passing By," given on the feast of our Lady's Assumption into heaven, 15 August 1961.

08/13/2021

“Mary has been taken up to heaven by God in body and soul, and the angels rejoice.”[1] Joy overtakes both angels and men. Why is it that we feel today this intimate delight, with our heart brimming over, with our soul full of peace? Because we are

celebrating the glorification of our mother, and it is only natural that we her children rejoice in a special way upon seeing how the most Blessed Trinity honours her.

It was on Calvary that Christ, her most blessed Son and our brother, gave her to us as our mother, when he said to St John: “Behold your mother.”[2] And we received her, along with the beloved disciple, in that moment of supreme grief. The Blessed Virgin embraced us in her suffering, as the ancient prophecy was fulfilled: “And a sword shall pierce your own soul.”[3] We are all her children, she is the Mother of all mankind. And now, the whole human race commemorates her ineffable assumption. Mary is welcomed to heaven: the Daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, Spouse of God the Holy Spirit. Greater than she no one but God.

A mystery of love

We face here a mystery of love. Human reason barely begins to comprehend. Only faith can shed some light on how a creature can be raised to such great heights, becoming a loving target for the delights of the Trinity. We know this is a divine secret. Yet because our Mother is involved, we feel we can understand it more—if we are entitled to speak this way—than other truths of our faith.

How would we have acted, if we could have chosen our own mother? I'm sure we would have chosen the one we have, adorning her with every possible grace. That is what Christ did. Being all-powerful, all-wise, Love itself,[4] his power carried out his will.

See how Christians discovered long ago this train of thought. St John Damascene writes: "It was fitting that

she who in childbirth preserved intact her virginity should preserve without corruption her body after the conclusion of her earthly life. It was fitting that she who bore in her womb the creator become a babe should dwell in the divine mansion. It was fitting that the spouse of God be taken to the heavenly home. It was fitting that she who witnessed her Son on the cross, suffering in her heart then the pain she was spared in childbirth, should contemplate him seated at the right hand of the Father. It was fitting that the Mother of God come to possess what belongs to her Son and that she be honoured as Mother and Servant of God by all creatures."[5]

Theologians have frequently come up with similar reasons to explain in some way the meaning of the abundant graces showered upon Mary and culminating in her assumption to heaven. They put it

this way: “It was fitting; God could do so; therefore he did.”[6] This is the clearest reason why our Lord granted his Mother, from the very moment of her immaculate conception, all possible privileges. She was free from the power of Satan. She is beautiful, spotless and pure in soul and body.

The mystery of silent sacrifice

But don’t forget: if God exalted his Mother, it is equally true that he did not spare her pain, exhaustion in her work or trials of her faith. A village woman one day broke into praise for Jesus exclaiming: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nourished you.” Jesus said in reply: “Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.”[7] It was a compliment to his Mother on her *fiat*,[8] her “be it done.” She lived it sincerely, unstintingly, fulfilling its every consequence, but never amid

fanfare, rather in the hidden and silent sacrifice of each day.

As we meditate on these truths, we come to understand better the logic of God. We come to realize that the supernatural value of our life does not depend on accomplishing great undertakings suggested to us by our overactive imagination. Rather it is to be found in the faithful acceptance of God's will, in welcoming generously the opportunities for small, daily sacrifice.

To become God-like, to be divinized, we must begin by being very human, accepting from God our condition as ordinary men and sanctifying its apparent worthlessness. Thus did Mary live. She who is full of grace, the object of God's pleasure, exalted above all the angels and the saints, lived an ordinary life.

Mary is as much a creature as we are, with a heart like ours, made for

joy and mirth as well as suffering and tears. Before Gabriel communicates to her God's plan, our Lady does not know she has been chosen from all eternity to be the Mother of the Messiah. She sees herself a humble creature.[9] That is why she can acknowledge, with full humility, that "he who is mighty has done great things"[10] in her.

The purity, humility and generosity of Mary are in sharp contrast to our wretchedness and selfishness. To the extent that we realize this, we should feel moved to imitate her. We, too, are creatures of God, and if we strive to imitate her fidelity, God will surely do great things in us. Our little worth is no obstacle, because God chooses what is of little value so that the power of his love be more manifest.[11]

Imitating Mary

Our mother is a model of correspondence to grace. If we contemplate her life, our Lord will give us the light we need to divinize our everyday existence. Throughout the year when we celebrate feasts dedicated to Mary and frequently on other days, we Christians can think of our Lady. If we take advantage of these moments, trying to imagine how she would conduct herself in our circumstances, we will make steady progress. And in the end we will resemble her, as children come to look like their mother.

First, let us imitate her love. Charity cannot be content with just nice feelings; it must find its way into our conversations and, above all, into our deeds. Our Lady did not merely pronounce her *fiat*; in every moment she fulfilled that firm and irrevocable decision. So should we. When God's love gets through to us and we come to know what he

desires, we ought to commit ourselves to be faithful, loyal—and then be so in fact. Because “not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven.”[12]

We must imitate her natural and supernatural refinement She is a privileged creature in the history of salvation, for in Mary “the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.”[13] But she is a reserved, quiet witness. She never wished to be praised, for she never sought her own glory. Mary is present at the mysteries surrounding the infancy of her Son, but these are “normal” mysteries, so to speak. When the great miracles take place and the crowds acclaim them in amazement, she is nowhere to be found. In Jerusalem when Christ, riding a little donkey, is proclaimed king, we don’t catch a glimpse of Mary. But after all

have fled, she reappears next to the cross. This way of acting bespeaks personal greatness and depth, the sanctity of her soul.

Following her example of obedience to God, we can learn to serve delicately without being slavish. In Mary we don't find the slightest trace of the attitude of the foolish virgins, who obey, but thoughtlessly. Our Lady listens attentively to what God wants, ponders what she doesn't fully understand and asks about what she doesn't know. Then she gives herself completely to doing the divine will: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word."[14] Isn't that marvellous? The Blessed Virgin, our teacher in all we do, shows us here that obedience to God is not servile, does not bypass our conscience. We should be inwardly moved to discover the "freedom of the children of God."[15]

The school of prayer

The Lord will grant you the ability to discover many other aspects of the faithful response to grace of our Lady. And to know these facets of her life is to want to imitate them: her purity, her humility, her fortitude, her generosity, her fidelity… But now I want to speak to you of an aspect that in a way encompasses all the others because it is a condition for spiritual growth. I'm speaking of her life of prayer.

To take advantage of the grace which our mother offers us today and to second at any time the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, the shepherd of our souls, we ought to be seriously committed to conversing with God. We cannot take refuge in the anonymous crowd. If interior life doesn't involve personal encounter with God, it doesn't exist—it's as simple as that. There are few things

more at odds with Christianity than superficiality. To settle down to routine in our Christian life is to dismiss the possibility of becoming a contemplative soul. God seeks us out, one by one. And we ought to answer him, one by one: “Here I am, Lord, because you have called me.”[16]

We all know that prayer is to talk with God. But someone may ask, “What should I talk about?” What else could you talk about but his interests and the things that fill your day? About the birth of Jesus, his years among us, his hidden life, his preaching, his miracles, his redemptive passion and death, his resurrection. And in the presence of the Triune God, invoking Mary as our mediatrix and beseeching St Joseph, our father and lord, to be our advocate, we will speak of our everyday work, of our family, of our friendships, of our big plans and little shortcomings.

The theme of my prayer is the theme of my life. That's the way I speak to God. As I consider my situation, there comes to mind a specific and firm resolution to change, to improve, to be more docile to the love of God. It should be a sincere and concrete resolution. And we cannot forget to ask the Holy Spirit, with as much urgency as confidence, not to abandon us, because "you, Lord, are my strength."[17]

We are ordinary Christians. We work at the most varied professions. All our activity takes place amid everyday circumstances. Everything follows a customary rhythm in our lives. The days seem the same, even monotonous. But don't forget that our condition which is apparently so common has a divine value. God is interested in everything we do, because Christ wishes to become incarnate in our things, to vivify

from within even our most insignificant actions.

This thought is a clear, objective, supernatural reality. It is not a pious consideration to comfort those of us who will never get our names inscribed in the annals of history. Christ is interested in the work we do—whether once or thousands of times—in the office, in the factory, in the shop, in the classroom, in the fields, in the exercise of any manual or intellectual occupation. He is likewise interested in the hidden sacrifices we make to keep our bad humour or temper to ourselves.

Review in your prayer these thoughts. Take occasion of them to tell Jesus that you adore him. And thus you have a formula to become contemplatives in the middle of the world, amid the noises of the street, at all times and in all places. This is the first lesson we should learn in

the school of intimacy with Christ. And in this school, Mary is the best teacher, because our Lady always kept this attitude of faith, of supernatural vision, regardless of what happened around her: “And his mother kept all these words in her heart.”[18]

Let us ask our Lady to make us contemplatives, to teach us to recognize the constant calls from God at the door of our heart. Let us ask her now: Our mother, you brought to earth Jesus, who reveals the love of our Father God. Help us to recognize him in the midst of the cares of each day. Stir up our mind and will so that we may listen to the voice of God, to the calls of grace.

Teacher of apostles

But let’s not think only of ourselves. Expand your heart until it takes in all mankind. Above all, think of those near you—relatives, friends,

colleagues—and see how you can get them to appreciate a deeper friendship with our Lord. If they are upright and noble, capable of being habitually close to God, commend them specifically to our Lady. And ask also for all those souls you don't know, because we have embarked together on a single voyage.

Be loyal, generous. We form part of a single body, the Mystical Body of Christ, the holy Church, to which are called those who seek the whole truth. Consequently, we are strictly obliged to manifest to others the quality and depth of the love of Christ. A Christian cannot be selfish. If he were, he would betray his vocation. Far from Christ are those content with keeping their soul in peace—and a false peace at that—while ignoring the good of others.

If we have accepted the authentic meaning of human life, which is

revealed to us in faith, we cannot remain peacefully on the sidelines. If in a practical and concrete way we aren't drawing others to God, we can't be at all satisfied with our behaviour.

There is a real obstacle to apostolate. It takes the form of false respect, the fear of touching on spiritual subjects, lest the conversation prove upsetting to certain people. It is a reluctance to take the risk of hurting feelings. How often is this reasoning the mask of selfishness. It's not a question of hurting, but of helping. Although we might be personally deficient, the grace of God converts us into useful instruments for aiding others. Regardless of our shortcomings, we are called to share with others the good news that "God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth."[19]

And what right do I have to involve myself in the lives of others? Because they need it. Without asking our permission, Christ has entered our lives. He did the same with the first disciples: “Walking along the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the water, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them: Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”[20] Each one of us retains the freedom, the false freedom, to say no to God, like the rich young man mentioned by St Luke.[21] But in obedience to Christ’s words, “Go and teach,”[22] we have the right and duty to speak about God, of this great human theme, because the desire for God comes from the deepest recesses of the heart of man.

Holy Mary, “Queen of Apostles,” queen of all those who desire to make the love of your Son known,

you understand our miseries so well. Ask Jesus' forgiveness for our shabby lives—for what could have been fire and has been ashes, for the lights that have gone out, for the salt that has turned insipid. Mother of God, you are omnipotent in your petition. Obtain for us, along with forgiveness, the strength to live truly a life of faith and love, so we can share our faith in Christ with others.

The only prescription: personal sanctity

The best remedy against losing apostolic daring, which comes from effective hunger to serve all men, is none other than the fullness of faith, hope and love. In a word: sanctity. I can find no other prescription than personal sanctity.

Today, in union with the whole Church, we celebrate the triumph of the Mother, Daughter and Spouse of God. And just as we rejoiced at the

resurrection of our Lord three days after his death, we are now happy that Mary, after accompanying Jesus from Bethlehem to the cross, is next to her Son in body and soul, glorious forever.

Behold the mystery of the divine economy. Our Lady, a full participant in the work of our salvation, follows in the footsteps of her Son: the poverty of Bethlehem, the everyday work of a hidden life in Nazareth, the manifestation of his divinity in Cana of Galilee, the tortures of his passion, the divine sacrifice on the cross, the eternal blessedness of paradise.

All of this affects us directly, because this supernatural itinerary is the way we are to follow. Mary shows us that we can walk this path with confidence. She has preceded us on the way of imitating Christ, her glorification is the firm hope of our

own salvation. For these reasons we call her “our hope, cause of our joy.”

We can never lose hope of becoming holy, of accepting the invitations of God, of persevering until the very end. God, who has begun in us the work of our sanctification, will bring it to completion.[23] Because if the Lord “is with us, who can be against us? After having not spared his very own Son, but rather turned him over to death for us, after having thus given us his Son, can he fail to give us every good thing?”[24]

On this feast, everything points to joy. The firm hope of our personal sanctification is a gift from God, but man cannot remain passive. Remember the words of Christ: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his daily cross and follow me.”[25] Do you see? The *daily* cross. No day without a cross; not a single day in which we are not

to carry the cross of the Lord, in which we are not to accept his yoke. Let this opportunity serve to remind us again that the joy of the resurrection is a consequence of the suffering of the cross.

But don't fear. Our Lord himself has told us, "Come unto me all you who are burdened and labour, for I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is sweet and my burden light."[26] And St John Chrysostom comments: "Come, not to give an account but to be freed of your sins. Come, because I don't need the glory you can give me: I need your salvation… Don't fear if you hear me talk of a yoke, it is sweet; don't fear if I speak about a burden, it is light."[27]

The way to our personal sanctification should daily lead us to the cross. This way is not a sorrowful one, because Christ himself comes to our aid, and in his company there is no room for sadness. I like to repeat with my soul filled with joy, there is not a single day without a cross—the Cross.

Christian joy

Let us pick up again the subject proposed to us by the Church: Mary has gone to heaven in both body and soul, and the angels rejoice. I can imagine, too, the delight of St Joseph, her most chaste spouse, who awaited her in paradise. Yet what of us who remain on earth? Our faith tells us that here below, in our present life, we are pilgrims, wayfarers. Our lot is one of sacrifices, suffering and privations. Nonetheless, joy must mark the rhythm of our steps.

“Serve the Lord with joy”[28]—there is no other way to serve him. “God loves a cheerful giver,”[29] the man who gives himself entirely with wholehearted sacrifice, because there is absolutely no reason to be disheartened.

We could think perhaps that this optimism is excessive. Are we not well acquainted with our shortcomings and failures? We are no strangers to suffering, tiredness, ingratitude, even hate. If we Christians are made of the same stuff as other men, how can we shake off the retinue of misery that constantly accompanies our human nature?

It would be naive to ignore the suffering and discouragement, the sadness and loneliness that meet us relentlessly as we go through life. But our faith has taught us with absolute certainty to see that life’s disagreeable side is not due to blind

fate, that the destiny of the creature is not to rid himself of his desires for happiness. Faith teaches us that everything around and in us is impregnated with divine purpose, that all things echo the call beckoning us to the house of our Father.

This supernatural understanding of earthly existence does not oversimplify the complexity of human life. Rather, it assures us that this complexity can be shot through with the love of God, that beyond the disagreeable surface can be discovered the strong and indestructible link that binds our life on earth with our definitive life in heaven.

The feast of the Assumption of our Lady prompts us to acknowledge the basis for this joyful hope. Yes, we are still pilgrims, but our mother has gone on ahead, where she points to

the reward of our efforts. She tells us that we can make it. And, if we are faithful, we will reach home. The Blessed Virgin is not only our model, she is the help of Christians. And as we besiege her with our petitions —“Show that you are our Mother”[30]—she cannot help but watch over her children with motherly care.

For a Christian, joy is a treasure. Only by offending God do we lose it, because sin is the fruit of selfishness, and selfishness is the root of sadness. Even then, a bit of joy survives under the debris of our soul: the knowledge that neither God nor his Mother can ever forget us. If we repent, if an act of sorrow springs from our heart, if we purify ourselves in the holy sacrament of Penance, God comes out to meet and forgive us. Then there can be no sadness whatsoever. Then there is every right “to rejoice, because your brother was dead and

has come back to life, was lost and has been found."[31]

These words are taken from the marvellous ending of the parable of the prodigal son, which we shall never tire of meditating. "Behold [the Father] comes out to meet you. He will bend down to greet you. He will give you a kiss as a sign of love and tenderness. He will order the servants to bring you new clothing, a ring, shoes for your feet. You still fear reproach and he returns your dignity. You fear punishment and he gives you a kiss. You dread a harsh word and he prepares for you a banquet."[32]

The love of God is unfathomable. If he is so generous with those who have offended him, what won't he do to honour his immaculate Mother, the most holy Virgin, faithful always?

If the love of God can achieve such great results when the response from

our human heart, which is frequently a traitor, is so small, how much more will it accomplish in the heart of Mary, who never resisted in the slightest the will of God?

See how the liturgy of today's feast reveals the impossibility of understanding divine mercy by human reasons alone. More than explaining, the liturgy sings. It arouses the imagination, so that each of us can add enthusiasm to praise. Yet, when all is said and done, we will fall short. "A great marvel appeared in the heaven: a woman, dressed with the sun, with the moon at her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."[33] "The king has fallen in love with your beauty. How resplendent is the daughter of the king, with her robe spun from gold!"[34]

The liturgy draws to a close with some words of Mary, in which the

greatest humility is combined with the greatest glory: “All generations shall call me blessed, because he who is mighty has done great things in me.”[35]

Cor Mariae Dulcissimum, iter para tutum: Most Sweet Heart of Mary, prepare a safe way. Guide our steps on earth with strength and security. Become for us the path we are to follow, since you in your love know the way, a sure short-cut, to the love of Jesus Christ.

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[1] Antiphon, vespers, feast of the Assumption: *assumpta est Maria in coelum, gaudent angeli*

[2] John 19:27

[3] Luke 2:35

[4] *Deus caritas est:* “God is love” 1 John 4:8

[5] *Homilia II in dormitionem B.V. Mariae*, 14 (PG 96,742)

[6] Cf John Duns Scotus, *In III Sententiarum*, d.III, q.1

[7] Luke 11:27-28

[8] Luke 1:38

[9] Cf Luke 1:48

[10] Luke 1:49

[11] Cf 1 Cor 1:27-29

[12] Matt 7:21

[13] John 1:14

[14] Luke 1:38

[15] Cf Rom 8:21

[16] 1 Sam 3:5

[17] Ps 42:2

[18] Luke 2:51

[19] 1 Tim 2:4

[20] Mark 1:16-17

[21] Cf Luke 18:23

[22] Cf Mark 16:15

[23] Cf Phil 1:6

[24] Rom 8:31-32

[25] Luke 9:23

[26] Matt 11:28-30

[27] *In Matthaeum homiliae*, 37,2 (PG 57,414)

[28] Ps 99:2

[29] 2 Cor 9:7

[30] Hymn *Ave Maris Stella: Monstra te esse Matrem*

[31] Luke 15:32

[32] St Ambrose, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, 7 (PL 15,1540)

[33] Rev 12:1

[34] Ps 44:12-14

[35] Luke 1:48-49

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