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Homily at the Mass for the Assumption at the Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden on 15 August 2018

Homily given by Fr Andrew Soane for the Mass of the Assumption on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the visit of St Josemaría Escrivá to the Shrine to consecrate Opus Dei to Our Lady on 15 August 1958

20/08/2018

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman adorned with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and with the twelve stars on her head for a crown (Rev 12:1). This is the wonderful image the Church gives us in the First Reading of the Solemnity of Our Lady's Assumption into Heaven, which we celebrate today.

And in the Responsorial Psalm (Ps 45:10, 12, 16): The queen stands at the king's right hand, in garments of gold. And in the Alleluia verse: Mary is taken up to heaven, exalted above the angels.

For Mary is the greatest work of all God's creation. Daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, Spouse of God the Holy Spirit... Greater than you, none but God! (CPB 171)

And on her entrance into Heaven the angels rejoice! And we, too, rejoice upon seeing how the most Blessed Trinity honours her. Isn't it logical

that children should rejoice in their mother's happiness? Of all the Church's great feasts, this one has a special note of joy: in a certain sense, Mary's Assumption is a *special gift* God has given us.

For not only has he redeemed us, saved us, made us his children... he has also given us our Mother Mary. It's another reason to sing that phrase from the Easter *Exultet*: *O felix culpa!* O happy fault, which not only won us so great and wonderful a Redeemer, but also gave us so fair a Mother. And so we exalt her, just as she herself foretold: *All generations shall call me blessed.*

This great Feast goes right back to the early days of the Church; it has been celebrated for one and a half thousand years, and the Fathers and Doctors of the Church spoke of Mary's Assumption as a belief

already familiar and universally accepted.

St Augustine asks, in a homily on the Assumption: *How should Paradise **not** take up her who brought life to all mankind?*

And St John Damascene writes: *It was fitting that she who had carried the Creator as a child on her breast, should dwell in the tabernacles of God... It was fitting that she, who had gazed on her crucified Son, pierced in the heart by the sword of sorrow which she had escaped in giving him birth, should contemplate him seated with the Father. It was fitting that God's Mother should share the possessions of her Son, and be venerated by every creature as the Mother and handmaid of God. (Homilia 2 in Dormitionem B. V. Mariæ, 14).*

And another early author declares: *As the most glorious Mother of Christ*

(our God and Saviour, giver of life and immortality), she is enlivened by him to share an eternal incorruptibility of body with him who raised her from the tomb and took her up to himself in a way he alone can tell.

St Paul, in today's Second Reading, speaks of Jesus Christ as the new Adam: *Just as all men die in Adam, so all men will be brought to life in Christ.* (1 Cor 15:23) And the Fathers present Mary as the new Eve, intimately associated with the victory of the new Adam over sin and death. And so, as Pius XII explained when he promulgated the dogma, *just as the glorious resurrection of Christ was an essential part of this victory and its final trophy, so the struggle shared by the Blessed Virgin and her Son was to end in glorification of her virginal body.*

Raised up to glory, Mary is a sign of hope for us. Our Mother, already

body and soul in Heaven, shows us what lies ahead for us, too. St Josemaría explains: *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 achieve it.* (CPB, 177)

As Mother, Mary is very close to each one of us. She who is *Refuge of Sinners, Help of Christians*, is always attentive to us. And we go to her, we fly to her (as the prayer has it), because her pleading before her Son is always effective: as intercessor, she is all-powerful, for Jesus can refuse her nothing.

As St Josemaría wrote, *Mother! Call her again and again. She is listening, she sees you in danger perhaps, and with her Son's grace she, your holy Mother Mary, offers you the refuge of her arms, the tenderness of her embrace. Call her, and you will find*

yourself with added strength for the new struggle (The Way, n. 516).

The Assumption of Mary was attacked during the Reformation; in England, its strongest defender was St Thomas More.

When, in March 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Succession, St Thomas foresaw that he would be asked to swear the Oath. So, to prepare spiritually for the fight, he went on his last pilgrimage: to here, the shrine of Our Lady of Willesden. It was from here, on Easter Sunday, 5th April 1534, that he wrote his last letter before being taken to the Tower of London, where he suffered martyrdom fifteen months later.

St Thomas may not have guessed all that would happen to his country, but he knew there would be lost that connection with the many generations of Christians who had

practised the faith from the time of St Augustine.

Instead of exalting Mary, the new rulers of England did their best to stamp out her memory. On 20th September 1538, the fires of Chelsea consumed the statue of Our Lady of Willesden. And then there was silence—a silence that lasted for over three hundred and fifty years, until 1892, when a new statue of Our Lady of Willesden was blessed by Cardinal Vaughan. Now that Willesden is again a place of pilgrimage, we can make up for those centuries of silence and indifference, with our love and affection for her.

Sixty years ago today, St Josemaría came to this shrine to renew the consecration of Opus Dei to the Sweet Heart of Mary. An eyewitness later recalled that *he placed the whole world, and specifically the United Kingdom, in the hands of the Blessed*

Virgin. He asked her to fill every soul with a yearning to know and love God. It delighted him to be able to pray in the heart of London, which he saw as the crossroads of the world.

And so, kneeling at this shrine he prayed: ***We consecrate to you our being and our life; everything that is ours: all that we love and all that we are. Our bodies, our hearts and our souls are for you; we and our apostolates are yours. We want everything, in us and around us, to belong to you and to share in your motherly blessings.***

On this evening, as we rejoice in our Mother's exaltation, let us go to her intercession, full of trust—just like St Thomas More, just like St Josemaría. Let us place under her patronage our desire to respond better to the invitation that Jesus makes to each one of us.

We can also place under her protection the concerns of our times; the conflicts between peoples, the glaring injustices and inequalities, hatreds and mistrusts... in short, all that troubles peace and goodwill in our world.

We can finish with the words of St John Paul II, which he addressed to the faithful on the feast of the Assumption in 1995: *Together let us praise the Mother of Christ and of the Church, together with all those who venerate her in every corner of the earth. How I wish that everywhere, and in every language, joy would be expressed for the Assumption of Mary! How I wish that this mystery would shed the brightest light on the Church and on humanity! May every man and every woman realize that they are called to share in the heavenly glory of their true Mother and Queen!*

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