



Reflections on the Assumption

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James Hanvey SJ contemplates Botticini's 'The Assumption of the Virgin' and finds that it not only captures the complex mystery of the Assumption, but also illuminates the truth contained within this great feast. 'The Assumption gives us a vision of the home that awaits us, and the promise that is and will be fulfilled.'

In the National Gallery in London there is an impressive painting by Francesco Botticini. Its theme is '[The Assumption of the Virgin](#)' and it is believed to have been commissioned for a church in Florence around 1475/76.

I think that the first thing that strikes the person looking at the painting is its geometry. The contrasting colours delineate the two planes of earth and heaven. On the plane of earth is a hill on which there is a rectangular stone sarcophagus; it contains no body but is filled with lilies. The scene deliberately echoes the artistic depictions of the resurrection of Christ. The disciples are gathered in various groups. Some are gazing into the empty 'tomb', others gathered in discussion; a few seem to be caught in some interior act of wonder. I think Botticini has placed the viewer in a privileged position, which appears to elude the disciples.

The hill on which we find the disciples gathered around the flower-filled sarcophagus is part of a defined landscape. Two rivers flow from behind the hill towards us. They help us to locate the plane and to recognise that it is a flattened landscape with a low blue horizon. This shallow horizontal plane serves to heighten the vastness of the vertical plane of heaven, which opens up above the disciples, accessible to us but unrecognised by them. If the earth moves towards a defined horizon, the organisation of the different orders of heaven in tiered hierarchical rings, successively suspended in the golden vault of an open heaven, moves us beyond a horizon in time and space



From Francesco Botticini's 'The Assumption of the Virgin' (1475/6), The National Gallery

into an infinite depth. At the centre of the great colosseum of angels and saints is Mary, kneeling before her son. All the major figures of salvation history are gathered as privileged witnesses of the event. Here, Botticini is pointing to the eschatological significance of Mary's Assumption. The drama of our salvation is complete; we have moved from the puzzling witness of the flower-filled sarcophagus and its absent body on earth, to the transparent vision of heaven. His

arrangement of the complementary but contrasting planes of earth and heaven moves us from speculation into contemplation. In this way, the painting acts as an icon. It changes our status; we are no longer just viewers. From being a *viator* we have become a *comprehensor* – from being wayfarers, we have come to rest in a fullness of vision and understanding.

Though painted nearly five hundred years before Pius XII defined the doctrine of the [Assumption](#) (1950), Botticini's painting contains all the major aspects that the definition was to recognise.¹ The painting, like the doctrine, was not without its controversy. While devotion to Mary seems to be so natural and central to the Catholic understanding and experience of the Christian faith, to many protestant Christians and others it is at least unnecessary and at worst a sign of how far parts of the Church have strayed from biblical faith. Yet this dispute is not new. Controversies over how the Church thinks about Mary and expresses those thoughts date back to the recognition of her ancient title, *Theotokos* ('God Bearer' or 'Mother of God'), at the Council of Ephesus (431).

Mary is not alone in presenting a challenge to theology. The Church still struggles to express an adequate theology of the Holy Spirit, yet there can be no doubt about the Spirit's presence in the life of Christ and in the lives of all believers. To different degrees the same could be said of all the central doctrines of Christian faith, not least the Trinity. Our theological articulation of the significance of Mary and her role within the Church and the lives of Christians always seems to follow our devotional practice. This should not really surprise us: often the truth of faith does not first come in a concept or a thought but in an experience, an insight or encounter, and this produces its own form of language, symbol and gesture. It's the difference between trying to map the moves of a ballet on paper and seeing it executed on stage. Imagine music if we only had the score and no sound.

In Mary, theology has to face this reality directly, and in doing so it learns a great deal about itself and its own method. Truth comes in many different genres, not least through an aesthetic experience which finds liturgical, devotional and artistic expression before it has a theological articulation. Even science recognises that a formula or a theory is finally persuasive because of its elegance or beauty as well as its logic. Indeed, one discloses the other. This is why the aesthetic arguments of 'fittingness' carry weight when it comes to both the doctrines of the [Immaculate Conception](#) and the Assumption. Similarly, typological and symbolic ways of reasoning can converge to help us grasp what is both profound and beautiful, when words or concepts alone might impoverish.

One way of understanding why the Church speaks of Mary with a loving and devotional boldness is to recognise that in speaking of her, the Church is always speaking about Christ and the life of grace in us as it comes into its eternal plenitude.

About Christ: It is not an accident or only a poetic touch by which the writer of Acts places Mary with the apostles at Pentecost. She is the *cantus firmus* of their faith and the truth that they are now called to serve. How could they ever mythologise Christ or turn him into a concept when they have his mother at the centre of their community? She keeps them (and the Church) true to the person of Christ. For Mary is the guarantor of the incarnation, guarantor of the reality of Christ who lived in a time, a place, a family, a people, with a God, a history and a hope. Her 'yes'

was not a coerced response nor an utterance given in a moment of being overwhelmed by the divine majesty. God never compels us but always bestows upon us the gift of freedom. For this reason, when Mary responds her acceptance is not a passive one. She anticipates that freedom which is the gift of her son to us, 'for in freedom Christ has set us free.' She is truly a free woman because her 'yes' to God is also her 'yes' to herself, who she was and who she would become as that impossible will unfolded in the life, death and resurrection of her son

About Us: In a real, personal and immediate way, Mary illuminates what it means to live a life totally alive to Christ and to God's purpose for our world. In her we see a complete freedom and an undivided will through which she places herself without reservation at the service of Christ and the kingdom. Hers is an unconditional freedom that does not need to see the future outcome in advance of saying yes. She only needs to encounter God's call and choice of her, nothing more is needed. For this reason, Mary's faith stands in the same line as that of Abraham and draws on the total faith of her son. In her we can begin to see something of the way in which the life of grace makes us more human, not less so. In the very fullness of her faith and womanhood, Mary shows us that faith does not close us off from the world but makes us more open to it. With her 'yes' she stands in solidarity with the poor and the victims, with all those who, like her, have had to hold a dead child in their arms, or flee their home to protect their family. This woman of Nazareth is in solidarity with all those who, in the midst of the precariousness and toil of an unrecognised domestic life, have never stopped believing that somehow, even in the darkness of suffering and death, God was working.

There are two texts of St Paul that help us understand the full reality of Mary's Assumption and why it is intimately part of our faith and our hope. At the end of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul reminds us that we do not know who we truly are until we finally stand in God's presence: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.' In her Assumption, the fullness of grace that Mary carried from her very first moment has now reached its plenitude. In the glory of the divine presence, she is now forever who God always intended her to be. It is a moment out of time, but it always has its roots in time. Eschatology

does not abolish our history, it is the event in which our history is complete, and its meaning now fully disclosed. In this sense, the Assumption of Mary is an eschatological event. As such, it is equally part of the economy of grace that it is made available to us as part of our hope and our faith. As always, Mary is the servant of her son, and so now in the fullness of his presence we are allowed to see with clarity and certainty our own destiny: what the triumph of his costly and loving grace means for us. In Mary's Assumption we can see that, finally, in God's presence we become completely ourselves, fully alive in body and soul. Still caught in the materiality of this world, itself yearning for freedom, we can barely imagine what it is to be alive in God's presence with God's own life. Yet in that presence, our history is not lost but redeemed and healed; now it can bear the fullness of God's glory. [Hopkins' poem](#) comparing Mary to the air we breathe captures this:

Was deemèd, dreamèd; who
This one work has to do—
Let all God's glory through,
God's glory which would go
Through her and from her flow
Off, and no way but so.²

In Mary's Assumption we can now grasp that *Theotokos* was more than just a title; it maps a whole ontology of grace. In this way, we can begin to grasp something of the meaning of the reality of the resurrection.

The resurrection will never lose its mystery for us until we are in God's presence, but we can begin to trace its features first in the Risen Christ and then in Mary, his mother. In the resurrection, Christ does not lose his body but the nature of its materiality and its properties are transformed. This must also be true for us. Although no longer subject to the cycles of disintegration and death, we do not cease to be God's creation. Our finite status is not diminished but we recognise that the finite can participate in the divine life; it can know a fullness of life and even creativity – for what is contemplation of God but the most creative thing that a creature can do? – because it is now totally secure in the plenitude of being. We experience this not so much *out of* ourselves but more completely *in* ourselves, for now we have become transparent to God's presence in us. In heaven, then, as Paul says, we find ourselves and come to know ourselves for the first time in Christ.

In a number of places Paul strives to give some sense of this transformation into God's own life and our 'bodily' status. Perhaps he comes closest to it in Philippians 3. In this chapter Paul reads his history and his future hope in and through his solidarity with Christ. It is, of course, predicated upon Christ's total solidarity with us. Now, for Paul, even death is integral to this solidarity at the heart of which is a reciprocity. If we have shared in his death, so we will share in his resurrection. Indeed, the resurrection becomes the deepest moment of solidarity or union, for our body will become like his body and, in some way, we will share in his body without loss of our own unique identity (Phil 3:21). Although Paul already grasps this reality deep within the intelligence of his faith, he still struggles to express it. If he is right, then there is something quite wonderful here for all of us, but especially for Mary: the very body in which she carried and nurtured her son is now part of his body for all eternity.

Yet, this 'self' that has come into its fullness is never a solitary 'I'. In their own ways, Paul and Botticini capture this. Paul speaks of the 'commonwealth' of heaven and Botticini shows us the great company of the heavenly court. Just as our life in this world is never a solitude but a solidarity, even when disrupted by sin, so in heaven it is perfected. For *communio* or *koinonia* are the essence of life. Such life belongs to the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, and is revealed as love in which the whole of redeemed creation participates. For this reason, in her Assumption Mary does not stand only in the presence of her son but again, as at Pentecost, she is found at the centre of the Church. So, too, her Assumption seals her solidarity with us. Yet Mary never loses her unique maternal mission to help us all find our way to her son. She belongs to the whole Church in every age. She is rooted in history but by God's grace not bound by it. Now all generations can lay claim to her maternal help. Wherever we are on that journey, the feast of the Assumption gives us a vision of the home that awaits us, and the promise that is and will be fulfilled. Mary of Nazareth, Mother of God and Mother of the Church assures us that the journey is worth making and that none of us travel alone.

Botticini's depiction of the disciples reveals an almost humorous honesty. They're rather like a group of theologians trying to come to grips with what has happened but still either looking into that strange,

lily-filled casket or too absorbed in their own discussion to notice what is now so magnificently before them. They need to move to that other plane. It is there that everything – the person, the history of Mary, and even the whole reality of salvation that they are trying to understand – becomes revealed. If they do not move, the casket, like the empty tomb, will always remain a strange phenomenon, a question that cannot produce an answer.

Whether we are theologians so preoccupied with tenure that we miss the mystery before us, or just busy getting through a day or a life, we need these glorious and audacious doctrines to arrest us and direct our eyes to another plane, one that puts things in perspective and gives us hope.

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¹ ‘...that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.’ Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), §44.

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe’.