

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are sitting at the table when Mary announces, “When I die, I’m going into heaven – body and soul.” Joseph looked hesitantly at his wife and responded: “That’s quite an assumption, Mary.”

In the ancient world, there was a great harvest festival at the full moon of August to celebrate new wine and summer weddings. Early Christians turned this harvest feast into a summertime celebration of Mary, the beloved bride of God, herself harvested into the wedding banquet of the kingdom. According to legend, the apostles assembled at Mary’s tomb and found it overflowing with herbs and flowers. In a place of death, they found life.

Mary, and our veneration of her, are very Catholic expressions of how profound, deep and precious is ALL of human life. The Assumption of Mary’s body – the first fruits of Christ’s resurrection – reminds us that the simplest actions are full of significance to God. All things and actions, everything material – communicates God’s meaning in our lives. Kneading bread, breaking an egg, observing our spouse or child sleeping, working the earth, chopping vegetables, going to work, singing a song. Ordinary, daily life – simple human life like Mary’s – is weighted with mystery and beauty and possibility. It is ALL glory bound – intended for God’s great harvest at the end of time.

Mary is the Catholic Church’s way of giving expression to all of this. Sure Jesus became flesh and fully human. But Mary is one of US! She was NOT divine. She was ONLY human. And she has been gathered in, bodily, by a God who will not let any of His precious creation go to waste.

Poets, preachers, hymn writers, theologians, the simple and the sophisticated, the soldier and the housewife, the tyrant and the oppressed – all have looked to Mary, calling upon her, cried out to her, invoked her simple name. Some would say that the western church, so dominated by male clerics and masculine images of God, is drawn to Mary as the feminine face of divinity united with fragile humanity. Others would say that her very simplicity has been subverted by the church itself, transforming her into an unapproachable queen of heaven or a woman of unearthly virtue.

But experience defies those easy categories. We’ve all seen the silent, prayerful fingering of the rosary by countless Catholics – in moments of crisis, in thanksgiving for her intercession, at joyous moments of celebration, as they approach their hour of death – and we witness a deep bonding with a woman of faith, who struggled and suffered as we do. The rosary is one of my favorite prayers, as it was both of my parents. Mary is someone who understands our struggles, disappointments and pains.

So what do we do about all of these appearances – Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje? They can be an embarrassment to sophisticated, modern believers. Yet those who have been favored by such apparitions report that she asks only one thing: pray for peace, work for peace, pray for peace, work for peace. Of course, the simplicity of the message belies the fact that it is not such an odd request in a world marked by so much violence and innocent suffering. Is it possible that she is embarrassed by the fact that her Son’s followers have not yet grasped His fundamental yet difficult teaching: forgiveness, reconciliation, peace? Is it possible that while religious leaders speak of many things, they have failed to plumb the depths of the primal New Testament word: God’s mercy extends from generation to generation – and we must be instruments of that mercy and peace?

In the 20 centuries since she became something more than a Jewish mother in a one-camel town, Christians have seen her as a suffering mother and a fiery patron of the oppressed, a faithful preacher and a

quiet virgin, a bone-weary refugee and a queen more glorious than the seraphim. Indeed, the collective imagination of the church shows no signs of failing to call her blessed in every new generation, in the guise of new images evoked by human need and the silent working of grace, with new acts of devotion and prayer. And is it any wonder? That mother wants for her children to give her a speech filled with her praises when she can feel their embrace, their kiss, their gentle touch? Ask for Mary's intercession – she is as close as the breath or our next whispered Hail Mary.

This feast day of the Assumption of Mary – so closely connected to the grape harvest of the ancient and modern Mediterranean, celebrates – in this one woman – what we all desire: to be carried, mercifully and lovingly, from death to life. The Feast of the Assumption is a harvest day for the church: we ask God to raise the barren, the unloved, the forgotten, the poor, the little ones of this earth. And we ask Mary to pray for us now and at the hour of our death, at the moment of our harvest into the great barn of God's merciful kingdom. Amen. (adapted from LITURGICAL CONFERENCE, August 15, 1995, Vol 28, #5, p. 39-40)

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