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Solemnity of the Assumption Luke 1:39-56

Today we celebrate the feast of the Assumption. We honor the Blessed Virgin Mary "taken up body and soul into heavenly glory." This dogma was promulgated by Pope Pius XII in 1950. Some say he was motivated to do this by the horrors of World War II, in which an estimated 75 million people were killed, in which so many human bodies were tortured and desecrated. The doctrine indirectly proclaims the precious nature of the human body, which, in a way we cannot yet understand, is destined for heavenly glory and so deserves to be treated with the highest respect. Although there is no mention of Mary's Assumption in the New Testament, the meaning of this feast is closely linked to the main themes of the Gospel. Mary, as the true disciple, she who "heard the Word of God and acted upon it," is the first to share in the resurrected life of her Son. What was for Mary a unique privilege is the promise given to all of Jesus' disciples--to share that resurrected life on the Last Day.

Today's feast is couched in language that stretches our imagination. As Pope Benedict has stated, it does not mean that Mary went to some unknown galaxy, but that her entire earthly life is a sort of blue-print for those who wish to follow in the footsteps of her Son, hoping to find their fulfillment in a dimension of existence beyond the material one we now experience. Though the horizon presented to us by this feast lies in the future, Mary's role in the Gospels would have us focus on the here and now.

The Gospel text given to us today for our reflection is known as the "Magnificat," Mary's hymn of praise to God after she has consented to be the mother of the Savior, as she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is also suddenly with child. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian, executed by the Nazis, speaks of Mary's song of praise as the oldest Advent hymn. "It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."

Many, many years ago when I was still a "baby" priest in my first assignment, I remember on this same feast of the Assumption one of the parishioners running up to me before Mass, with the missalette shaking in his hand, and saying to me, "Father,

we can't read this. People will get the wrong idea." To which I could only say, "No, I hope they hear it and get the right idea." What disturbed that man so much? "He has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."

Mary stands in the long Jewish tradition of female singers from Miriam to Deborah, Hannah and Judith, who all sang dangerous songs of salvation. Mary gives thanks that the Holy One of Israel, hearing the cries of the oppressed, seeing their misery, knowing well that they are suffering, coming now to redeem them, the Holy One aims to turn the unjust order of things upside down and make the world right again. God love everyone, poor and rich alike, but in an unjust world, that divine love is particularly on the side of those whose dignity must be restored. As Fr. John Neuhaus, the founder of First Things magazine, once wrote, "In the Kingdom of God, the dice are weighted in favor of the poor." God protects the poor, noticing their tears, while challenging the comfortable and the proud to conversion, to genuine discipleship, even at the loss of their/our own comfort. The divine intent is not to take revenge, but to build up a community of sisters and brothers marked by human dignity and mutual respect.

Mary shows us that faith does not shut us off from the world, but makes us more open to it. With her "yes" to God, she stands in solidarity with the poor and the victimized, with all those who, like her, have had to flee their homes to protect their families, who have had to hold a dead child in their arms. People in need in every society hear a blessing in Mary's song. The battered woman, the single parents without resources, those without food on the table or without even a table, the homeless family, the young abandoned to their own devices, the old who are discarded—all who are subject to social contempt are embraced in the hope Mary proclaims.

As disciples of Mary's Son we are called to be, in so far as we are able (and we should not sell ourselves short), agents of the change envisioned in Mary's song. Certainly we are not to be satisfied with the status quo. We are called to protect the bodies of those who are brutalized by demonic structures of oppression, inhuman establishments of inequality, and systems that debase people on account of their birth, sex, race, religion, sexual identity, physical difference or poverty. Let us dedicate ourselves to living out Mary's vision of God's plan and one day share with her the glory of her Son's risen life.