

August 15, 2020 The Body of the Christian Homily (Feast of the Assumption of Mary): At the present time I am reading a fascinating book written by the one-time President of Harvard University, Drew Gilpin Faust, entitled “The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War”. More than six hundred thousand soldiers lost their lives in that war. The author reveals in some detail how death changed not only individual lives, but the life of the Nation. She describes on a practical level how a culture rooted in the Christian faith struggled to reconcile the unprecedented carnage with its belief in a benevolent Creator.

In the wake of the devastation wrought by the war, could Americans still believe in the Resurrection of the Body? In the book’s preface she writes:

“A subject of age-old concern for believers and non-believers alike, the existence and nature of an after-life took on new urgency both for soldiers anxious about their own deaths and for bereaved kin speculating on the fate of the departed. And if spirits and souls proved immortal, there still remained the vexing question of bodies. The traditional notion that corporeal resurrection and restoration would accompany the Day of Judgment seemed increasingly implausible to many Americans who had seen the maiming and the disfigurement inflicted by this war. Witnesses at field hospitals almost invariably commented with horror on the piles of limbs lying near the surgeon’s table, disassociated from the bodies to which they had belonged, transformed into objects of revulsion instead of essential parts of people. These arms and legs seemed as unidentifiable... and un-restorable... as the tens of thousands of missing men who had been separated from their names. The integral relationship between the body and the human self it housed was as shattered as the wounded men”.

The Resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our faith. Our hope as Christians through God’s revelation is that not only our soul, but our body, our total human person, will be joined to the life of the resurrected Christ in glory. Our bodies will be transformed and transfigured by God. Saint Paul is emphatic on this very point. He writes, “And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then he who raised Jesus will give life to your own mortal bodies though the Spirit living in you”. (Rom. 8:11)

Our bodily resurrection is a consequence of our faith. God fashioned for himself a human nature. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. On this feast of the Assumption, we commemorate Mary’s being taken up into heaven, body and soul. God would not allow her to see the corruption of the tomb since from her own body she marvelously brought the Author of Life.

What distinguishes Catholic Christianity from virtually all other religions is that the body is sacred and is destined to enter into eternal glory. Many religions regard the body as an albatross which eventually turns to dust and ashes. The body is the soul’s jailer. Not so, Christianity. Matter is not evil, but is one with God’s Spirit to enter into eternal glory.

One reason why the Church forbade cremation was because she insisted on teaching the resurrection of the body, a teaching disputed by other faith traditions. To once again quote Saint Paul: “The corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, this mortal body with immortality”.

What we Christians believe God has done to Mary; we also firmly believe He will do to us if we die in the Lord. We believe that our whole person, body and soul will be raised to a new level of existence.

Mary is waiting for us bodily in heaven.

Amen!