

Right in the middle of the Bread of Life discourse which we have been hearing for the past few weeks, today we are taking a break to celebrate the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, body and soul, into Heaven. In speaking about the Assumption, Pope Benedict once said “Precisely because Mary is with God and in God, she is very close to each one of us. While Mary lived on this earth she could only be close to a few people. Being in God, who is actually within all of us, Mary shares in this closeness of God. She knows our hearts, can hear our prayers, can help us with her motherly kindness. She always listens to us and, being the Mother of the Son, participates in the power of the Son and in his goodness. We can always entrust the whole of our lives to this Mother.” Important clarification here: Pope Benedict said that Mary is WITH God and IN God. He did not say she was God. Sometimes people mistake our devotion to Mary as a form of worship. We do not worship Mary. We give her great honor as the Mother of Jesus, who is God in the flesh, but we do not worship Mary.

Mary’s presence with God and in God in heaven is what allows her to also be present to her children here on earth, most visibly demonstrated by a number of apparitions throughout history, one of which is represented in the painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe in front of me. A more accurate copy of the image is hanging in the vestibule at the main entrance of the church. We celebrate Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, the anniversary of the date on which this image appeared on the tilma of Saint Juan Diego in Mexico. For those of you unfamiliar with the story of this image, I’ll give you an extremely short summary. Juan Diego was on his way to Mass when he encountered a woman who wanted him to ask the local bishop to build a church on the hill where they stood. The woman identified herself as the Blessed Virgin Mary. Juan Diego went to the bishop who refused to build the church without a sign that the woman really was who she claimed to be. Juan Diego returned and Mary told him to pick some roses--which were miraculously growing on top of the hill in the middle of December--and she arranged them in his tilma which was like a cloak he was wearing. Juan Diego returned to the Bishop, said this is the sign, opened the tilma, and the image miraculously appeared on the front of it. Scientists and historians and other experts have studied this image intensely in the five hundred years since it first appeared and have found that in many ways it is a coded message to both the Spanish and the Aztecs. After its appearance, millions of Aztecs converted to Christianity.

Hopefully the first reading explains why I have this painting up here. The woman in the image, Mary, isn't clothed with the sun but she is standing in front of the sun, making it look as if it is radiating out of her. The moon is under her feet and she is wearing a mantle of stars. Astronomers have examined the stars on her mantle and they tell us that it is a star map and the stars are in the position they would have been in over Mexico City on December 12, 1531, the day the image appeared. But what's really cool is that when the star map is placed over the image, the constellation Corona Borealis is encircling Mary's head. Corona Borealis is also known as the Northern Crown, so she actually is wearing a crown of stars. Finally, according to the Aztec names of the constellations, there is also a serpent wrapped around her waist.

To the Aztecs, the woman's loose hair indicates that she is a virgin. Second, the bow around her waist indicates that she is also pregnant. And third, in this painting, it is pretty obvious that her knee is bent, indicating that she is walking or dancing. This pregnant virgin is on the move--think of Mary going in haste to visit Elizabeth; which is what we just heard in the Gospel. Since the image first appeared on Juan Diego's tilma, the church has believed that this is Our Blessed Mother on the move once again, hastily carrying the message and true presence of her son into the world.

Today's first reading began with reference to the ark of the covenant. The first reading from the Vigil Mass last night told us about David bringing the ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Without going into detail, the Church has long understood Mary to be the new living ark of the covenant. The original ark contained the presence of God in the Jerusalem temple. Mary carried God made flesh in her womb. She carried the bread of life in her womb. And now, by virtue of her assumption into heaven she is able to continue her work of leading people to her son.

There is a practical application of the Assumption. Mary carried Jesus in her womb to Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah. She was the first evangelist proclaiming the explosive good news that we were about to be rescued from our captivity to the devil, sin, and death. We heard about the joy with which both John the Baptist and his mother received the presence of Christ. Now...what happens when we receive Holy Communion? We receive the body and blood of Christ and carry it within us; Jesus becomes part of us. If the old ark carried the presence of God into the promised land...if Mary, the new ark, carried Jesus, who is both true

God and true man, to the hill country of Judah and beyond...what do we become when we receive the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist? We become living arks as well. When we receive the body of Christ, it is our duty to carry him out to the world.

When he wrote about the Dormition--or falling asleep--of Mary, Saint John Damascene said: "Today the holy, incomparable virgin enters the heavenly sanctuary that lies above the universe...Today the holy, living ark of the living God, the one who carried her own maker within herself, comes to her rest in the temple of the Lord not made by hands. David--her ancestor and God's--leaps for joy; the angels join in the dance."

May we also become true arks, carrying within us the joy of the gospel wherever we go so that David and the angels and all the saints might leap for joy when we come to rest in that same temple not made by human hands. Let us pray together, Hail Mary...