

Munificentissimus Deus and the Unity of Body and Soul

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NOVEMBER 1, 2020, marked the seventieth anniversary of the issuance of the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), in which Pope Pius XII pronounced, declared, and defined the dogma of the Assumption. As milestones go, the seventy-year mark would typically serve as an adequate prompt for some measure of recognition and ceremony. But in this case, the occasion slipped past quietly.

As a purely practical matter, November 1, is, of course, the date of another solemnity, the Feast of All Saints, and the coincident occurrence of the two may have left those best positioned to commemorate the dogma's proclamation preoccupied with other matters. More conspicuously, the current global pandemic has had a muting effect on all manner of things, ecclesial and otherwise. But other, more deeply-rooted, factors may have played a role as well.

At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops chose to locate their consideration of Mary within the broader context of ecclesiology. Without questioning that move, some theologians have suggested that the decision not to produce a separate conciliar document on Mary had a disorienting and dampening effect on what had been a vibrant Marian movement within the Church, one that largely emanated from the Marian apparitions of the mid-nineteenth century. In turn, those who were best able to fuel further developments in Mariology and sustain a lively Marian devotion among the faithful found themselves confined to the margins.¹

¹ Joseph Ratzinger refers to the matter as a “profound crisis of postconciliar Marian doctrine and devotion” and says of the move at the Council to envelop Mariology

Focusing more directly on the dogma itself, the Assumption, as an ecumenical lightning rod, simply doesn't carry the same charge as Mary's Immaculate Conception.² Because Catholics are not as likely to find themselves fending off theological accusations regarding the Assumption, they might feel less compelled to devote their energies to understanding the dogma or, for that matter, engaging in basic liturgical or devotional pieties surrounding Mary's Assumption. In turn, the Assumption may, in a sense, evanesce into the ether for many of the faithful.

Although an emphasis and focus on Mary's Immaculate Conception, relative to her Assumption, might well exist for reasons that are easy to intuit, those reasons are also mistaken. The two are intrinsically related—they cannot be properly viewed as disconnected events in the life of Mary, or as entirely distinct dogmas, revealed to the Church in disjointed fashion. As such, the treatment of the Assumption in this brief commentary will draw significantly on its relationship with the Immaculate Conception. Importantly, the consideration of that relationship will take place primarily through the lens of the Church's teaching on human nature as a unity of body and soul. The commentary will close with a short discussion of catechetical considerations that follow from this perspective.

Body–Soul Unity

Before proceeding directly into a discussion of Mary's Assumption, a succinct summation of the Church's teaching on the human person—specifically the nature of the relationship between the human body and the

within ecclesiology that “the immediate outcome of the victory of ecclesiocentric Mariology was the collapse of Mariology altogether.” For his historical account, tersely summarized here, see “Thoughts on the Place of Marian Doctrine and Piety in Faith and Theology as a Whole,” in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 19–36, at 19–24. Benoît-Dominique de La Soujeole, O.P., notes that the issue was one of the most divisive at the Council—a swing of only twenty votes out of nearly twenty-two hundred would have reversed the outcome (“The Universal Call to Holiness,” in *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 37–53, at 46–49).

² The prominent Protestant New Testament scholar Scot McKnight states: “As Protestants we go to the Bible first, but we find nothing about Mary’s death or her assumption in the Bible. Does that mean Mary wasn’t ‘assumed’ into heaven? Obviously not. . . . So we are left to examine the evidence and make up our own minds” (*The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus* [Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2007], 133).

human soul—will prove useful. An important inflection point in the development of the Church's doctrine on this matter is found in the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas states unequivocally that the human person is composed of both a soul and a body, and, relying on conceptions developed by Aristotle, that the intellectual soul is the form of the body: "The first thing by which the body lives is the soul. And as life appears through various operations in different degrees of living things, that whereby we primarily perform each of all these vital actions is the soul."³

There is an interdependency, however, which works in the other direction as well. Aquinas indicates that "the form [the soul] is not for the matter [the body], but rather the matter for the form."⁴ The soul is dependent on sense perception, a faculty it does not possess, for the acquisition of knowledge.⁵ Further, when the soul is deprived of its connection with a corporeal body, as upon death, certain of its powers are lost.⁶ Thus, Aquinas is explicit in rejecting the notion that the human soul exists as a self-reliant, discreet entity, with the body functioning as mere instrument.⁷ Rather, for Aquinas, "the human being is an integrated whole, a unified composite of body and soul."⁸

Thomas's teaching essentially remains as the contemporary teaching of the Church. At the Second Vatican Council, the Church affirmed that, "though made of body and soul, man is one."⁹ Similarly, the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that "the human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual,"¹⁰ and that "spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature."¹¹ This notion of body-soul unity will serve

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 76, a. 1; cf. I, q. 75, a. 4. The quotation is taken from the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947). For an extensive exposition of Aquinas's thought on the composite nature of body and soul, see Gilles Emery, O.P., "The Unity of Man, Body and Soul, in St. Thomas Aquinas," in Emery, *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 209–235.

⁴ ST I, q. 76, a. 5.

⁵ ST I, q. 76, a. 5.

⁶ ST I, q. 77, a. 8.

⁷ See Emery's explanation in "Unity of Man," 210–11.

⁸ Paul Gondreau, "The Humanity of Christ, the Incarnate Word," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 252–76, at 266.

⁹ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §14.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], §362.

¹¹ CCC, §365.

as a useful frame of reference in considering the relationship between the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

Ineffabilis Deus and *Munificentissimus Deus*

The dogmatic definition of Pope Pius IX's apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854) states that "the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin."¹² At the risk of stating the obvious, the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception is concerned primarily with the metaphysical; the Church, in other words, understands original sin as a disorder that afflicts the soul. The Second Council of Orange refers to original sin as "the death of the soul," and it specifies the physical body as the locus of *punishment* for sin. Aquinas affirms this characterization, as does the Council of Trent.¹³

In *Ineffabilis Deus*, we see explicit reference to this association between original sin and the soul in Pius IX's brief retracing of the doctrinal history of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Noteworthy is a quote from Pope Alexander VII, who states that, with regard to the Blessed Virgin Mary, "ancient indeed is that devotion of the faithful based on the belief that her *soul*, in the first instant of its creation and in the first instant of the soul's infusion into the body, was . . . preserved free from all stain of original sin" (emphasis added).¹⁴

Subsequently, Pius affirms that Mary "was entirely a fit habitation for Christ, *not because of the state of her body, but because of her original grace*" (emphasis added). The phrase "original grace" here is a clear reference to the special grace by which her soul was preserved from the stain of

¹² Translation taken from papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm.

¹³ Second Council of Orange, can. 2. Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 83, a. 1, and Council of Trent, *Decree on Original Sin*, §2. The phrase "death of the soul" is obviously hyperbole. Although the Church's teaching on the immortality of the soul took time to crystalize, its roots stretch back to ancient Judaism. See Ratzinger's treatment of this topic in *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 104–61 and 241–60.

¹⁴ Pius IX is here quoting from Alexander's apostolic constitution *Sollicitudo Omnium Ecclesiarum*, given on December 8, 1661, nearly two centuries prior to *Ineffabilis Deus*. Pius further notes that the definition of *Ineffabilis Deus* is a renewal of constitutions and decrees issued by predecessor popes "in favor of the doctrine asserting that the *soul* of the Blessed Virgin, in its creation and infusion into the body, was endowed with the grace of the Holy Spirit and preserved from original sin" (emphasis added).

original sin.¹⁵ But the notion that Mary was “a fit habitation for Christ” also harkens back to the opening paragraph of *Ineffabilis Deus*, where Pius places special emphasis on Mary’s predestination:

From the very beginning, and before time began, the eternal Father chose and *prepared* for his only-begotten Son a Mother in whom the Son of God would become incarnate. . . . So wondrously did God endow her with the abundance of all heavenly gifts poured from the treasury of his divinity that this mother, *ever absolutely free of all stain of sin*, all fair and perfect, would possess that fullness of holy innocence and sanctity than which, under God, one cannot even imagine anything greater. (emphasis added)

Thus it is that at the opening of the apostolic constitution we are told that the sanctity of Mary’s soul at her very conception was predestined from before the ages, and at the close we are given the definition of her Immaculate Conception. It is the purity of Mary’s soul, granted as a special grace, that runs from the beginning to the end of *Ineffabilis Deus*.¹⁶

In a shift of emphasis, the dogma of the Assumption is self-evidently concerned with the fate of Mary’s body when the course of her earthly life reached its completion. In light of the Church’s teaching on human nature as a composite of body and soul, one can see on an intuitive level why, “when it was solemnly proclaimed [in *Ineffabilis Deus*] that Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, was from the very beginning free from the taint of original sin, the minds of the faithful were filled with a stronger hope that the day might soon come when the dogma of the Virgin Mary’s bodily

¹⁵ Cf. Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), §§8 and 18.

¹⁶ Other than the quote at the beginning of this paragraph, which explicitly asserts that the state of Mary’s body was *not* the basis for her suitability as the biological mother of Jesus, *Ineffabilis Deus* contains only four other explicit references to Mary’s body. Two of these serve simply to acknowledge her body as the physical locus of her soul. Another— “more holy than holiness, singularly holy and most pure in soul and body”—appears in a paragraph which consists of a litany of poetic praises for Mary, understandably present in a text which proclaims her Immaculate Conception, but not elemental to the arguments therein. The final case states that Mary was “entirely free from every stain of sin, and from all corruption of body, soul and mind.” This mention is likely a passing reference to Mary’s Assumption. Such would not be surprising given that the doctrine of the Assumption had already been in development for several centuries, even though it would be almost another century before it was elevated to the level of dogma.

Assumption into heaven would also be defined by the Church's supreme teaching authority.¹⁷

As an explication of Mary's bodily Assumption, *Munificentissimus Deus* does not take the form of an exhaustive theological treatise. Rather, it culls from a body of evidence—one that has accumulated over the course of centuries—some of the salient points that led the Church to define and proclaim the Assumption as dogma. Matthew Levering notes that the contemporary understanding of the truth of Mary's Assumption is buttressed by three considerations: the teaching authority of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the legitimacy of typological reading as a method of interpreting Scripture, and the fittingness of the Assumption within the context of the faith as a whole. Elements of all three can be found in *Munificentissimus Deus*.¹⁸ Appeals to the history of the liturgy also provide insight into the Church's understanding regarding the Assumption.¹⁹

But in addition to these lines of argumentation, there also appears to be a logic at work at the intersection of the state of Mary's soul—as a consequence of her Immaculate Conception—and the notion of body–soul unity as understood and taught by the Church.²⁰ Mary's Immaculate Conception straightforwardly implies that her soul entered a state of beatitude immediately upon her death.²¹ Correspondingly, *Munificentissimus Deus* takes issue with the notion that that her body, following her death, could be anywhere but with her soul in heaven.²²

¹⁷ Pope Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), §6; cf. §§4 and 27.

¹⁸ Matthew Levering, *Mary's Bodily Assumption* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 2. For arguments in *Munificentissimus Deus* that appeal to the Church's teaching authority, see especially §§12, 41, and 44. For examples of typological reading of Scripture, see §§26, 29, and 39. For arguments from fittingness, see §§18, 32, 34, 36, and 38.

¹⁹ See, for example, §§16–20.

²⁰ Others have viewed the Marian dogmas from the perspective of body–soul unity. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, asserts that the Incarnation required an assent from Mary that entailed the entirety of her human nature, body and soul, an act of her whole person (“Mary in the Church's Doctrine and Devotion,” in Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, 99–124, at 104 and 131).

²¹ With regard to Mary's Immaculate Conception, the *Catechism* notes that Mary was “redeemed from the moment of her conception” (CCC, §491) and that “by the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long” (CCC, §493).

²² One mildly curious feature of *Munificentissimus Deus* is that it repeatedly affirms Mary's temporal (physical) death (§§14, 17, 18, 20, and 21) but is entirely silent on the length of time her body remained in the tomb before its Assumption. According to various texts which date to as early as the late fifth century, Mary committed her

Pius XII appeals, for example, to Amadeus, Bishop of Lausarne, who “held that the Virgin Mary’s flesh had remained incorrupt—for it is wrong to believe that her body has seen corruption—because it was really united *again* to her soul and, together with it, crowned with great glory in the heavenly courts” (§28; emphasis added). Pius also turns to St. Bonaventure, who, in a typological reading of Song of Solomon 8:5, argues: “We can see that she is there bodily; . . . her blessedness would not have been complete unless she were there as a person. The soul is not a person, but the soul, joined to the body, is a person. It is manifest that she is there in soul and in body. Otherwise she would not possess her complete beatitude” (§32).²³ Similarly, Pius notes that St. Peter Canisius “declared that the very word ‘assumption’ signifies the glorification, not only of the soul but also of the body” (§36).²⁴

These quotes suggest that the state of Mary’s soul was taken as a given, already established by virtue of her Immaculate Conception, and that the fate of her body can, in turn, be inferred from the intrinsic unity of her body and her soul. The specific and unique “effects” of the Assumption for Mary are stated clearly enough at the outset of *Munificentissimus Deus*. While, upon death, the immortal souls of the just ascend to the glory of heaven (albeit, for most, after first enduring the purifications of purgatory), their bodies undergo the corruption of the grave and are reunited with their souls only at the general resurrection: “God does not will to grant to the just the *full effect* of the victory over death until the end of time has come” (§4). Mary, however, is an exception. Her body is not subjected to corruption, and “she did not have to wait until the end of time for the redemption of her body” (§5).²⁵

soul to Jesus upon her death, and three days later Jesus returned to take her body to heaven, where it was reunited with her soul. See Brian E. Daley, “Introduction,” in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, trans. Brian E. Daley, S.J. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 1–45, at 7–8.

²³ Quoting St. Bonaventure, *De Assumptione B. Mariae Virginis, Sermo 1*.

²⁴ Pius also draws upon St. Bernardine of Siena, who sees, in the inherent unity of body and soul, an analogical argument in favor of the Assumption: “The likeness between God’s Mother and her divine Son, in the way of the nobility and dignity of body and of soul—a likeness that forbids us to think of the heavenly Queen as being separated from the heavenly King—makes it entirely imperative that Mary ‘should be only where Christ is’” (*Munificentissimus Deus*, §33). Pius draws the argument and the quote from St. Bernardine of Siena, *In Assumptione B. Mariae Virginis, Sermo 11*.

²⁵ These two effects of the Assumption are repeated a number of times, either individually or in tandem, throughout *Munificentissimus Deus*, albeit with some variation in the manner of expression from one instance to the next (see §§14, 17, 20, 22, 29, and 40).

To be clear, it is the case that *all* human persons ultimately retain their nature as a body–soul composite; physical death brings about a strictly temporary interruption that will be resolved at the general resurrection.²⁶ Mary’s exemption from bodily corruption, as well as the reunification of her body with her soul shortly after death, make her an exceptional case. The sanctity of her soul—her freedom from sin—means that her body was not subject to the repercussions of sin, that is, corruption and separation from the soul.

Before moving forward, it should be acknowledged that there are a number of different theological tacks one can take in explicating the dogma of Mary’s Assumption. As *Munificentissimus Deus* reaches its apex, Pius XII notes that Mary was “from all eternity joined in a hidden way with Jesus Christ in one and the same decree of predestination” (§40; recalling the opening paragraph of *Ineffabilis Deus*), that she was engaged in a common struggle with him against Satan as prophesied in Genesis 3:15, and that her Assumption is the proper culmination of the privileges associated with her divine maternity, particularly in light of her Son’s resurrection (§39). Nothing in this commentary detracts from that understanding. Rather the purpose is simply to highlight and discuss one particular facet of the logic which binds these two dogmas together.

Evidence from the Liturgy

Ineffabilis Deus marshals a range of testimony and argumentation in support of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. With regard to Scripture, the protoevangelium (Genesis 3:15) weighs heavily in Pius IX’s explication of the dogma. Already in the second paragraph of the apostolic constitution, Pius states that “it was wholly fitting that so wonderful a mother should be ever resplendent with the glory of most sublime holiness and so completely free from all taint of original sin that she would triumph utterly over the ancient serpent.” In four other cases throughout the course of the text, Mary is specified as the one who crushed the head of the serpent.

Hugo Rahner expounds upon this biblical text as it was understood by the Church Fathers:

²⁶ For Aquinas, the separation which takes place at death leaves the surviving soul, deprived of its body, in an intrinsically unnatural state which cannot be maintained in perpetuity; see *Summa contra gentiles* IV, ch. 79, no. 10. For an informative discussion, see Emery, “The Unity of Man,” 228–34.

God's first word of salvation, spoken outside the locked gates of Paradise, already indicates a woman, a single woman, who could never be overcome by Satan. . . . This woman was first of all Eve, to whom the astounding promise was made that the Redeemer should come from her race. But the full meaning of the prophecy [in Genesis 3:15] is only realized when we see foreshadowed in Eve the other "Mother of all the living," who herself should actually give birth to the Savior. . . . The woman who crushed the serpent's head was the Mother of God-made-man. From the beginning of Catholic theology the text has thus been interpreted.²⁷

In *Ineffabilis Deus*, Pius IX notes that it was in the New Testament texts which identified Mary as "full of grace" (Luke 1:28) and "blessed among women" (Luke 1:42) that the Fathers and Doctors of the Church recognized her as the new Eve who crushed the head of the serpent.²⁸

As noted earlier, *Munificentissimus Deus* does not function so much as a theological treatise as it does a proclamation. There is, however, in §39 of that text, an interesting scriptural justification for the Assumption of Mary. There, Pius XII invokes Genesis 3:15—the verse which plays a central role in *Ineffabilis Deus*—and the reading of that verse by the Church Fathers, whereby they recognize Mary as the new Eve who "is most intimately associated with [Christ] in that struggle against the infernal foe which, as foretold in the protoevangelium, would finally result in that most complete victory over the sin *and death* which are always mentioned together in the writings of the Apostle of the Gentiles" (emphasis added).

Genesis 3:15 serves here as the link which connects *Munificentissimus Deus* back to *Ineffabilis Deus* and Mary's Immaculate Conception, and the phrase "and death"—an almost seemingly innocuous addition—is the incremental scriptural move which marks the turn to Mary's Assumption. At the conclusion of the line just quoted above, *Munificentissimus Deus* cites via endnote several verses from the Pauline epistles which illustrate the point—that St. Paul views Christ's death and resurrection as a joint victory over both sin and the consequence of sin, which is death (Rom 5–6; 1 Cor 15:21–26; 1 Cor 15:54–57). *Munificentissimus Deus* §39 continues:

²⁷ Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough, O.P. (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus, 2004), 16–17.

²⁸ Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, §§7 and 11.

Consequently, just as the glorious resurrection of Christ was an essential part and the final sign of this victory, so that struggle which was common to the Blessed Virgin and her divine Son should be brought to a close by the glorification of her virginal body, for the same Apostle says: "When this mortal thing hath put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory" [1 Cor 15:54].

Thus Mary, who "suffered temporal death . . . could not be kept down by the bonds of death" (§17; quoting the Gregorian Sacramentary). While *Ineffabilis Deus* has as its emphasis the conquering of sin in the person of Mary by virtue of her Immaculate Conception, *Munificentissimus Deus* reveals the manner in which her bodily Assumption evinces in her person the conquering blow against death.²⁹ Her Assumption, in turn, is an instantiation of what will eventually occur for all the faithful, a concrete manifestation of what the just can hope for at the general resurrection.

As something of a check on these observations, I will now turn to the Church's liturgy for the Feast of the Assumption. In *Munificentissimus Deus*, Pope Pius XII states that "the sacred liturgy, 'because it is the profession, subject to the supreme teaching authority within the Church, of heavenly truths, can supply proofs and testimonies of no small value for deciding a particular point of Christian doctrine'" (§16).³⁰ He similarly notes that the Church's liturgy "springs from [the Catholic faith] . . . as the fruit comes from the tree" (§20). In an earlier encyclical, *Mediator Dei*, Pius explains that, in the liturgy, the truth entrusted to the Church is proclaimed in several ways: the recitation of the Creed, the celebration of the Eucharist, "and likewise by the reading of holy scripture" (§47).

Against this backdrop, I will consider changes which took place in the liturgy for the Feast of the Assumption, particularly with regard to the selection of readings from Scripture, subsequent to the promulgation of *Munificentissimus Deus*. The missal which bears examination is that which was issued by Pope Paul VI in 1969, because the lectionary which corresponds to this missal saw significant increases in and revisions to

²⁹ It is worth noting that the word "death" appears exactly once in *Ineffabilis Deus* (no adjectival or verbal variants of the word appear), and in that case it is not in any way central to the argumentation therein. The word appears sixteen times in *Munificentissimus Deus*.

³⁰ Pius is here quoting from his own encyclical letter *Mediator Dei* (§48), issued three years earlier (1947); cf. *Mediator Dei* §45.

the specific biblical texts to be read during the Liturgy of the Word.³¹ In his 1974 apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul indicates with regard to Marian feasts that “[the] numerical increase [in scriptural readings] has not however been based on random choice: only those readings have been accepted which in different ways and degrees can be considered Marian, either from the evidence of their content or from the results of careful exegesis, supported by the teachings of the magisterium or by solid Tradition” (§12).

Prior to 1969, the first reading at the Mass for the Feast of the Assumption was taken from the Book of Judith, verses 13:22–25 and 15:10.³² One can readily understand why these particular verses were selected for reading on a Marian feast day: in the second sentence of the reading, the Israelites praise Judith for an act of valor, saying, “Blessed art thou, O daughter, by the Lord the most high God, above all women upon the earth,” an obvious adumbration of Elizabeth’s words to Mary during the Visitation.³³ More significant for our purposes, however, is the following sentence: “Blessed be the Lord who made heaven and earth, who hath directed thee to the cutting off the head of the prince of our enemies.”³⁴ Here we see a clear harkening back to Genesis 3:15 as it is read by the Church—particularly as emphasized in *Ineffabilis Deus*—where Mary is understood as the new Eve who crushes the head of the serpent. Notably, however, there is nothing in this passage that evokes a sense of victory over *death* as concretized in the Assumption of Mary.

³¹ Pope Paul VI’s 1969 Missal constitutes the first revision since the 1950 promulgation of *Munificentissimus Deus* to introduce significant changes to the selection of readings for the Mass. On that specific dimension, the 1969 Missal is essentially equivalent to the missal that is in use today (the 2002 Missal of Pope John Paul II).

³² The verse numbering indicated here corresponds to the Sisto-Clementine Vulgate (the Church’s official text of Scripture at that time), as well as the Douay-Rheims translation of that text. In contemporary translations, e.g., RSV 2nd Catholic Edition, the corresponding text appears in verses 13:17–20 and 15:9. The discrepancy is caused by the fact that St. Jerome was translating from a Semitic text which no longer survives, whereas contemporary translations are based on a Greek translation of the original Semitic text.

³³ Judith is a heroine who saved the Israelite people from impending military defeat through a dangerous and cunning mission in which she beheaded the general of the Assyrian army. The Old Testament character of Judith has long been understood as a type of the Virgin Mary. See, for example, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church’s Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 19–29. Cf. St. Jerome, Epistle 22, no. 21.

³⁴ Cf. Luke 1:42. The scriptural quotations here are taken from the Douay-Rheims text, which was the translation used in the Church’s missal at that time.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Pope Paul's 1969 missal does not retain this reading for the Feast of the Assumption. Note, however, that the second reading for the Mass is 1 Corinthians 15:20–27, one of the passages cited by *Munificentissimus Deus* as emphasizing that Christ's victory through his death and resurrection was a victory not just over sin, but over sin and death. In these verses, St. Paul tells us that Christ is risen from the dead, and that "he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is *death*, for 'he subjected everything under his feet'" (emphasis added).³⁵ The entire passage is taken from a larger discourse within 1 Corinthians on the bodily resurrection of the dead.³⁶

The other readings selected for the Mass are similarly reflective of the emphases found in *Munificentissimus Deus*. The first reading, for example, is taken from the Book of Revelation. In the latter verses of that selection, John gives an account of his vision of the woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet, whom the Scholastic Doctors interpreted to be the Blessed Virgin, already assumed into heaven (§27).³⁷ The reading begins, however, with John describing that portion of his vision in which he sees the Ark of the Covenant resting in God's temple in heaven (Rev 11:19). *Munificentissimus Deus* notes how some of the Doctors and Fathers of the Church "have looked upon the Ark of the Covenant, built of *incorruptible* wood and placed in the Lord's temple, as a type of the most pure body of the Virgin Mary, preserved and exempt from all the corruption of the tomb and raised up to such glory in heaven" (§26; emphasis added).³⁸ In corresponding fashion, the Gospel reading is taken from 1:39–56 of

³⁵ The text as quoted here comes from the current missal, which takes its scriptural texts from the New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms (1991). As for the inner quotation, St. Paul is quoting from Ps 8:6.

³⁶ In fact, sin, per se, is not mentioned at all in the passage read at Mass. Several verses prior, Paul states that Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3), but he then moves into a lengthy discussion of Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of the dead.

³⁷ The missal contains a different set of readings for the Mass held on the vigil of the Assumption, but they are thematically similar to the readings for the Mass during the day.

³⁸ Contemporary English translations of the biblical Hebrew text tell us that in Exod 25:10 the Lord instructs the Israelites to construct the ark using "acacia wood," a material with properties that render it fiercely resistant to decay. *Munificentissimus Deus* here reads *incorruptibili ligno*, or "incorruptible wood," obviously wanting to emphasize the connection between the Ark of the Covenant and the teaching of the dogma that Mary's body never suffered the corruption of the grave. Such a rendering is not without precedent, as the Brenton translation of the Septuagint renders the Greek text as "incorruptible wood." Cf. §29 for another reference to the Ark as a type of Mary.

Luke's Gospel, the first several verses of which convey Luke's typological rendering of Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant.

Collectively, the current readings for the Mass of the Feast of the Assumption convey the reality of Christ's victory over death as instantiated in the two "effects" of Mary's Assumption: the incorruptibility of her body and the reunification of her body with her soul. The first two readings displace the reading from the Book of Judith, present in previous missals, which, although decidedly Marian, does not anticipate Mary's Assumption as explicated by Pius XII. It is reasonable to infer that the current collection of readings constitutes a deliberate reflection of the rationale on display in *Munificentissimus Deus*.³⁹

Catechesis

Broadly speaking, Mary's Assumption, as a truth revealed to the Church, has an intrinsic beauty and appeal that should naturally draw the faithful into the Church's liturgical celebration of that feast. At a more specific level, the Church's teaching on the unity of the soul and the body, understood as one particular facet of the dogma, correlates well with certain catechetical deficiencies currently confronting the Church. The remainder of this commentary will focus on some of those issues.

The most obvious place to begin is with the Church's longstanding confession regarding the resurrection of the body. This teaching is overtly biblical, asserted unequivocally throughout the New Testament (e.g.: Matt 22:23–32; John 5:25–29; Acts 24:14–15; Rom 8:11, 23; 1 Cor 15; 2 Cor 5:1–5; Phil 3:20–21; 1 Thess 4:13–18). Support for bodily resurrection can also be found in the Old Testament, such that its status as a biblical truth stretches back over two thousand years.⁴⁰ Affirmation of bodily resurrection also pervades the various Christian creeds which have arisen over the centuries. Anyone who has ever attended Mass and participated in the recitation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed has professed a belief in the resurrection of the body.⁴¹

³⁹ The Liturgy of the Hours is also informative here. *Munificentissimus Deus* §39 constitutes a significant portion of the second reading from the Office of Readings on the Feast of the Assumption (as does §40, which continues the arguments of §39).

⁴⁰ In the Old Testament, support for bodily resurrection appears most notably in Dan 12:2–3

⁴¹ The final form of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which includes specific reference to the resurrection of the body, dates to 381. But all of the articles of the Apostles Creed, which also affirms the resurrection of the body, can be traced back to theological

And yet, there is evidence which suggests that, for many Catholics, this basic belief either hasn't taken hold or has deteriorated over time. Survey data reveals that, even among Catholics who self-identify as "conservative" and attend Mass at least three times per month, less than 60 percent believe in the resurrection of the body. Among self-identifying "liberal" Catholics who attend Mass with the same frequency, belief in bodily resurrection sits at 30 percent. Interestingly, the same survey indicates that the rate of belief in life after death for conservative and liberal Catholics is 85 and 75 percent, respectively. When these numbers are juxtaposed with the figures for resurrection of the body, we see that many who believe in an afterlife think that heaven entails, for all eternity, a disembodied existence, one in which their body will never be reconstituted and reunited with their soul after death.⁴²

Munificentissimus Deus expresses the hope that its formal proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption will strengthen belief among the faithful in the resurrection of the body, a hope which obviously has not been realized (§42). Celebration of Mary's Assumption, which encompasses the reunification of her body with her soul—emblematic of what will happen for all of us—provides a catechetical opportunity to address this confusion.

A closely related consideration involves the burial of the dead. With regard to the deceased, the Church has a very lengthy history of presumption in favor of burial of the body, as opposed to cremation. This position arose from a variety of considerations, including respect for the body, which, while alive was a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church also favors burial as a tangible sign of Christian belief in the resurrection of the body.

In 1963, the Church's Holy Office issued the instruction *Piam et Constantem*, relaxing certain canonical penalties in recognition that cremation may sometimes be undertaken "through innocent motives and for grave reasons."⁴³ Such might include hygienic or economic considerations: cremation could be permitted as a pastoral accommodation in locales where sanitary burial is not practicable, or when the cost of burial is unreasonably

formulas which were in circulation around the turn of the first century AD. See *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 22.

⁴² Survey data is taken from The Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture, *Relationships in America* (2014), 12–13. The survey is, admittedly, a bit dated, but it is difficult to imagine that the situation has improved over the last seven years.

⁴³ The instruction rejects cremation as a viable option in those instances where it is intended as a polemic against dogmatic pronouncements on the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul. The canonical penalties addressed here included denial of "ecclesiastical burial" (i.e., funeral rites).

prohibitive. Nonetheless, the instruction is clear that cremation should be exceptional: “Care should be taken so that the custom of burying the bodies of the faithful be religiously preserved; hence Ordinaries should . . . see to it that Catholics do not practice cremation and that, except in cases of necessity, they do not abandon the practice of burial, which the Church has always kept and which she consecrates with solemn rites” (§1).

The Church’s current Code of Canon Law, revised in 1983, contains a tersely-worded stipulation—one might argue an underspecified stipulation—which reflects the above instruction: “The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine.”⁴⁴ In 2016, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the instruction *Ad Resurgendum cum Christo* (To Rise with Christ), noting that, among the general population, the rate of cremation since the revision to canon law has “notably increased” (§1). More to the point, the presentation of this new instruction issued by the Holy See’s press office on October 25, 2016, noted that, despite the Church’s clear statements indicating that burial should be the norm, “the practice of cremation is significantly widespread also within the Catholic Church.”

Ad Resurgendum cum Christo “insistently recommends” burial of the body upon death, noting that this practice is the most effective expression of the Christian hope in resurrection of the dead (§3). Through burial of the body, the Church “intends to show the great dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person whose body forms part of their identity” (§3). Importantly, the Instruction explains that “by death the soul is separated from the body, but in the resurrection God will give incorruptible life to our body, transformed by reunion with our soul” (§3).

The overarching point is that the trend within the Church away from burial in favor of cremation may well reflect a decline in the understanding of (or belief in) the nature of the human as a body–soul composite. Conversely, the continuing and unconditional acceptance of cremation, along with the encouragement implicit in the proliferation of columbariums at Catholic parishes, may have the effect of reinforcing a deficiency in catechesis on basic matters of the Catholic faith: the resurrection of the body and the reunification of the resurrected body with the immortal soul. The dogma of the Assumption provides, in ways that are self-evident, an

⁴⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Code of Canon Law* (1983), can. 1176, §3.

occasion for recatechizing (or catechizing for the first time) the faithful on these important doctrines.

A third issue is that of abortion. As with resurrection of the body, this is another case where polls reflect a divide between self-identifying Catholics and the teaching of the Church: in a relatively recent poll, 56 percent of Catholics said that abortion should be legal in most or all cases (although the numbers improve somewhat with those who attend Mass weekly—33 percent said it should be legal).⁴⁵

At the outset of *Ineffabilis Deus*, we read that Mary was the one chosen and prepared by God to be the mother to his only-begotten Son, the mother “in whom the Son of God would become incarnate and from whom, in the blessed fullness of time, he would be born into this world.” It was by virtue of her immaculately conceived soul that she was able to offer her fiat to the angel Gabriel, and to God: “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Mary understood the implications of that fiat. She knew that, once pregnant, no one would question Joseph’s right to divorce her, and that, as all would assume her to be an adulteress, she could, under the law, be stoned to death. Free from sin, her intellect was able to grasp a higher truth and her will was able to muster a “yes” in the face of potentially dire consequences.⁴⁶

From that fiat, which was possible only because of the immaculate state of her soul, emerged her divine motherhood—a physical, biological, bodily motherhood. And when the one who took his flesh from her was crucified on the Cross, a sword pierced through her own soul also. Pope Pius XII tells us in *Munificentissimus Deus* that “it seems impossible to think of her, the one who conceived Christ, brought him forth, nursed him with her milk, held him in her arms, and clasped him to her breast, as being apart from him in body, even though not in soul, after this earthly life” (§38). That act of the soul, of the intellect and the will, meant that her body would not see corruption in the grave. Rather it would be assumed into heaven where it would be reunited with her soul. For Mary, in an extraordinary way, the motherhood that began with the Incarnation and continues to this day is an act of the soul and the body, an act of her entire being as a unified body–soul composite. An explanation of her Assumption (together with her Immaculate Conception) in this fashion might carry some weight for Catholics who lack clarity on the matter of abortion. It might, in other

⁴⁵ Dalia Fahmy, “8 Key Findings about Catholics and Abortion,” *Pew Research Center*, October 20, 2020.

⁴⁶ Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, §13.

words, reveal how the rejection of motherhood, when it takes the form of abortion, entails not just the routine surgical extraction of a biological entity; it carries, rather, a momentous gravity, a cutting moral edge that pierces all the way down to the soul.⁴⁷

Conclusion

In this commentary, I have suggested that the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* might fruitfully be understood by way of its relationship with *Ineffabilis Deus*, and through the lens of the Church's teaching on human nature as a unity of body and soul. I also proposed some catechetical opportunities that flow from such a perspective.

In keeping with the motivating purpose of this commentary—to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the promulgation of *Munificentissimus Deus*—I will close by letting the text speak for itself. Pope Pius XII, in formally proclaiming and defining the dogma of the Assumption, expresses his aspirations as follows:

And so we may hope that those who meditate upon the glorious example Mary offers us may be more and more convinced of the value of a human life entirely devoted to carrying out the heavenly Father's will and to bringing good to others. Thus, while the illusory teachings of materialism and the corruption of morals that follows from these teachings threaten to extinguish the light of virtue and to ruin the lives of men by exciting discord among them, in this magnificent way all may see clearly to what a lofty goal our bodies and souls are destined. (§42)

Coming from the pen of the Holy Father, this exhortation carries a catechetical weight all its own. As our Church faces the mountainous task of re-evangelizing the faithful—in heated competition with a secular culture that has lost its compass—his words, seventy years after the fact, still speak loudly to us. They are perhaps more relevant today than when they were first written. We would do well to heed them. N·V

⁴⁷ A fourth issue that is also germane to the topic at hand encompasses same-sex attraction (including same-sex unions) and gender dysphoria. For a recent discussion, see John Grabowski, "Sexual Difference and the Catholic Tradition: Challenges and Resources," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 19, no. 1 (2021): 111–134.