

Did Mary Die? Newman on Sin, Death, and Mary's Mortality*

PAUL J. GRIFFITHS
*Duke University Divinity School
Durham, NC*

DID MARY DIE at the end of her earthly life? In asking this question, I take for granted the dogma of the assumption, as defined and promulgated by Pius XII in 1950. With that dogma in mind, if the answer to the question is yes, then Mary, like all other human creatures, was mortal, and died, and her dead body was assumed into heaven, there to live again after being rejoined with her separated soul. If the answer is no, then she was not subject to the burden of mortality, and her living flesh was assumed directly into heaven. On the former view there was, for a time, a Marian corpse and a Marian separated soul; on the latter view there was neither. I should like to know which of these answers is right (they are contradictories, so there is no third option—not, at least, if the dogma is assumed), or more likely to be right; and in suggesting which is to be preferred, I use John Henry Newman as my principal interlocutor, who made some interesting, and even shocking, observations on the question, as he did on many other mariological topics.

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The question may seem beyond our capacity to answer. Scripture says nothing explicitly about it, and there is no defined church doctrine that speaks directly to it—the definition of the dogma leaves it open, as we shall see. It may also seem arcane. Certainly it has not been of central importance for the Church's speculative theologians. Nevertheless, it does have its importance, both in Newman's thought and for the Church at large. Addressing it brings clarity about the relation between sin and death, and there is no doubt that the proper construal of that relation is of central importance to the grammar of Christian thought. Is it the case, as the mainstream Catholic tradition has long asserted, that the presence of sin, whether inherited or performed, is both necessary and sufficient for the fact of death—that without sin there is no death, and that with sin death is inevitable? Or, perhaps, are there other causes for death, causes independent of sin? Questions of this sort, about death and about death's attendants and servants, are of central importance to any theological anthropology, and are, too, of existential significance to most of us. If thinking about Mary's mortality can shed light on these matters, that is a good reason for engaging in it.

One more preliminary. For Christian theologians, as also for most people, the question about why we die is not sufficiently answered by describing and analyzing the biological facts about aging. Certainly we age, but saying so, and explaining what aging consists in at the cellular and subcellular levels, does not answer the question about why we die. It only moves that question back a stage, leaving unanswered the more fundamental questions about why the aging process is as it is, and about why there is an aging process at all. These questions are especially pressing for Christians because for us death is always an occasion for lament. It's the principal sign that things are not as they should be. We know, with depth and passion, that we were not made to die, and that there is therefore something deeply disordered about the fact that we do. Thinking about the question of Mary's death may help us understand death's lamentableness better.

I begin by discussing something Newman did not know about, as it occurred sixty years after his death. I mean the definition of the

dogma of Mary's assumption into heaven.¹ It is uncontroversial that this definition does not answer the question of this essay, but it is nevertheless important to show briefly that this is the case, and why.

Mary Immaculate, the ever-virgin Mother of God, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory when the course of her earthly life was completed—"Immaculatam Deiparam semper Virginem Mariam, expleto terrestris vitae cursu, fuisse corpore et anima ad caelestem gloriam assumptam" (*Munificentissimus Deus* §44). That is what the dogmatic definition of the assumption explicitly states. The formulation is neutral with respect to the question of Mary's death. To speak of the completion (*expletio*) of her life, its fullness or consummation or satisfaction, might indicate death. Life can be completed or brought to an end by death, and ordinarily, for human creatures, it is; death is where such lives find their end. But *expletio* leaves open the possibility that life might be completed in other ways. The word, verb and noun, indicates the attainment of an end in a purely formal way, without any substantive suggestion as to what the end might be. We might paraphrase: when everything Mary needed to do here below was done, she was at once assumed bodily into heaven. Whether dying was something she needed to do is neither affirmed nor denied by the dogmatic definition.

The rationale for the dogmatic claim about Mary's bodily assumption given most often in *Munificentissimus Deus* is that it is a settled part of Christian thought about Mary that her flesh is exempt from corruption, which is to say the rotting ordinarily consequent upon death understood as the separation of soul from body. The assumption of her body into heaven guarantees the impossibility of this, for there is no corruption there. There are ancient affirmations of the incorruptibility of Mary's flesh in the Christian tradition, as there also are about the dead bodies or body parts of some other saints. This element of Mariology, then, is a settled part of Catholic faith and practice. Mary's flesh does not decay—is incorrupt—and is unlike all other flesh in having been taken into heaven without having to wait upon the general resurrection. Mary's flesh, assumed incorrupt, is established

¹ I refer to the Latin text of *Munificentissimus Deus* given at www.vatican.va. That text does not include sectional numbers; I take those from the English version given at the same Web site.

in heaven as the precursor or forerunner of what the flesh of each of us will eventually be. But whereas our flesh will have had its corruption and dispersal overcome because we will have died and rotted or had our flesh otherwise consumed, Mary's entered upon its heavenly state without need for any such overcoming because it had never undergone corruption and dispersal in the first place.

But this formulation of the sense of the dogmatic definition, and of the traditions underlying and informing it, leaves the speculative question of this essay unanswered. On a mortalist reading of the definition, according to which Mary did die before her body was assumed, the difference between her and us has to do not with death but with corruption, for Mary differs from us in death only in that her dead flesh does not rot and is taken into heaven before the general resurrection. This has been the view of the vast majority of Catholic theologians who have addressed this topic; it is also the position most often taken or implied by devotional literature and liturgical practice. Immortalism—the view that Mary did not die and was assumed alive, with body and soul unseparated—has been a minority view, but by no means one without defenders. The text of the dogmatic definition is largely, and by intent, neutral on the question. But it does have, or can plausibly be read to have, a slight bias toward immortalism.

Munificentissimus makes a strong connection between Mary's assumption and her immaculate conception. She won a complete victory over sin by means of her immaculate conception (*immaculata conceptione sua peccatum devicit*, §5), we are told, and it is because of this that her flesh was not subject to the usual law of corruption, and that she did not have to wait for its redemption. The heart of the matter, Pius XII writes, and what the faithful already believe most firmly, is that Mary was never liable to the corruption of the grave (*sepulcri corruptioni obnoxium fuisse numquam*, §14). By contrast, the faithful do not find it difficult to believe that she died (*ex hac vita decessisse*, §14), and *Munificentissimus* quotes the *Sacramentum Gregorianum*, which explicitly says that she did (*sancta Dei Genitrix mortem subiit temporalem*, §17). Most of the liturgical, theological, and homiletical precedents quoted and discussed in *Munificentissimus*, however, have to do not with whether Mary died before her flesh was assumed, but rather with the appropriateness of the idea that her flesh was not subject to

corruption. Sometimes, this *convenientia*, this elegance of fit, is said to be with Mary's perpetual virginity: just as her body's integrity was not broken in conceiving and giving birth to Jesus, so her fleshly integrity was not corrupted in the passage from life here below to life eternal (§§21, 32, 34). Sometimes it is in terms of intimacy with and likeness to the dead flesh of Jesus, which was also not subject to corruption (§§21–22). Sometimes it is in terms of the Ark of the Covenant's incorruptibility as a type of the incorruptibility of Mary's flesh (§26). And sometimes it is in terms of the unlikelihood that the risen Jesus would wish to be apart from his mother in body as well as in soul (§38).

This does not exhaust the reasons Pius gives for the view that Mary's body was assumed incorrupt into heaven. Most of the reasons have nothing to say to the question of her mortality. Some do rather strongly suggest immortalism, however, as with Albert the Great's claim that Mary was exempt from the fourfold curse laid on Eve, which includes that of death (§30). In this line too is Pius's own claim, mentioning the *Protevangelium of James* as precedent, that calling Mary the second Eve implies that Mary overcame not only sin but also death (§39). But others among the reasons given and precedents cited rather strongly suggest that Mary did die. In this line is Francis de Sales's claim that any good son would bring his mother back to life if he could (§38), or Alphonsus Liguori's that Jesus did not wish to have his mother's body corrupted after her death ("*Iesus Mariae corpus post mortem corrumpi noluit*," §38).

When *Munificentissimus* ends its review of precedent and Pius begins to write in his own voice, all the formulations are carefully neutral about whether Mary's soul was ever separated from her body. The text says that Mary arrived at a complete victory over sin and death ("*plenissimam deventurum erat victoriam de peccato ac de morte*," §40), and then that these two (sin and death) are always conjoined in Paul's writing ("*semper in gentium Apostoli scriptis inter se copulantur*," §40). If a victory over sin, then also one over death—which suggests immortalism, even if without quite implying it. And, even in the wording of the solemn definition itself (although the phrase "when the course of her earthly life was completed" is equally friendly to mortalism and immortalism), the phrase "[she] was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory" is rather more friendly to immortalism. It suggests that

there had been no separation of Mary's body from her soul, that when she was assumed into heaven it was with body and soul still together, and therefore that when she was assumed she was still living. This last point about the wording of the solemn definition is not often made; I make it because one of the characteristics of those lives of Mary that do assert and describe her death is that they accentuate the fact that her soul ascended before her body was assumed—and therefore that soul and body were not assumed together, as they would have been had she been still alive. This distinction can be seen, with baroque detail, in the life of Mary attributed to Maximus the Confessor,² and in many other such lives. On a mortalist view, it is odd to speak of Mary's assumption as pertaining to her body and soul together, for on that view they must have been separate when the body was assumed, and therefore were not assumed together. On an immortalist view, it is not in the least odd to write in this way. That is the principal reason why, on the surface of the text, the solemn definition is marginally more friendly to immortalism than to mortalism.

About *Munificentissimus Deus*, then, we can say that some among the authorities and precedents it cites are clear that Mary died before being assumed; that some, though fewer, imply strongly that she did not; and that others are neutral. Pius's own dogmatic definition, while slightly more friendly to immortalism, is finally uncommitted on the question. Since 1950, there has been no significant development of doctrine on the topic.³ The Church therefore has no dogmatic position on the question before us. Discussion of it remains properly within the scope of speculative theology.⁴

² This work has been recently translated and studied by Stephen Shoemaker, *The Life of the Virgin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

³ *Lumen Gentium* §§52–69 essentially repeats the position, and almost the phraseology, of *Munificentissimus Deus* on this question. But note also *Lumen Gentium* §56, which deploys the Eve/Mary typology in ways that emphasize Mary's victory over death; and §53, which emphasizes that Mary is one with all human beings in their need for salvation. In the 1992 *Catechism*, *Lumen Gentium* §59 is quoted without much expansion, though there it is also written that Mary's assumption is a "singular participation in her Son's resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians" (§966), which may, but need not, be read to imply her death. No position is explicitly taken in any of these sources.

⁴ The most thoroughgoing speculative contribution to the question of Mary's mortality to date remains Martin Jugie's *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge, étude*

With this reading of *Munificentissimus Deus* in mind, what about Newman's position on Mary's mortality?

Newman's thought about Mary is ordered first and most fundamentally around the idea of *convenientia*. This is not a word he uses much, but the English words he does use—aptness, appropriateness, fitness, fittingness, congruity, and so on—are all expressive of this fundamental and ancient idea. For example, a homily preached in 1849, on or close to the Feast of the Assumption, is titled (by Newman) “On the Fitness of the Glories of Mary,”⁵ and the entire homily is patterned around the idea of fitness: that is to say, the beautiful appropriateness that Mary should have had the privileges granted to her and merited by her. “Nothing,” Newman writes, “is too high for her to whom God owes His human life.”⁶ That is, once it is known that Mary is *Theotokos/Deipara*, which is to say the mother of the Lord, then the development of Marian doctrine proceeds in considerable part by assessing whether this or that claim about her is apt to her status as such—whether the claim in question can, with the right degree of beautiful appropriateness or elegant fittingness, be made of her. Two additional formulations of this working principle from the same homily are: “no limits but those proper to a creature can be assigned to the sanctity of Mary” and “Mary must surpass all the saints; the very fact that certain privileges are known to have been theirs persuades us, almost from the necessity of the case, that she had the same and higher.”⁷

These claims can be usefully glossed in the following way. First, negatively, the attribution of a privilege to Mary is inapt if it cannot belong to a creature, but only to the Lord. Second, positively, if a priv-

historico-doctrinale (Rome: Biblioteca Vaticana, 1944). There was considerable interest in and writing about this topic in the 1940s and 1950s, in preparation for and response to the 1950 dogmatic definition, and there is little doubt that Jugie's work was especially influential on both the phraseology and the arguments of *Munificentissimus Deus*. There has been little discussion of the matter since the Second Vatican Council.

⁵ I have used the text given in Philip Boyce, ed., *Mary: The Virgin Mary in the Life and Writings of John Henry Newman* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), 149–66. In the discussion of Newman that follows, I have benefited considerably from Nicholas Gregoris's “*The Daughter of Eve Unfallen*”: *Mary in the Theology and Spirituality of John Henry Newman* (Mt. Pocono, PA: Newman House Press, 2003).

⁶ Boyce, *Mary*, 152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 159–60.

ilege contributes to the holiness of a human creature, then it is apt to attribute it to Mary, and in maximal degree if it permits a maximum. And third, as a partial specification of the second, positive claim, if we know some among the saints to have possessed a particular privilege, then it is apt to attribute that privilege also to Mary, but in surpassing degree. Newman's thought about Mary, then, proceeds along two axes, one to do with creaturehood and the other to do with holiness. Mary is a creature, and nothing must be said of her or offered to her that stands in tension with such an understanding. And Mary's status as *Deipara* requires that she be, among creatures, first in holiness. Mary is not, in Newman's view, constituted as God's mother solely by her assent to the offer made by Gabriel at the annunciation; rather, that offer is made because she is holy, because she is a creature uniquely fitted by her holiness to conceive and bear the Lord. This is something Newman writes repeatedly, most often in the context of defending the dogma of the Immaculate Conception to Anglicans, and for obvious reasons. In the *Letter to Pusey*, and occasionally in the letters and sermons, Newman strongly emphasizes Mary's avoidance even of venial sin during the course of her life, in addition to underscoring, in accord with the dogmatic definition of 1854, that she was conceived immaculately, without the stain of original or inherited sin.⁸ Mary's holiness, unsurpassable among creatures, the condition that makes it apt for Gabriel to come to her, and makes it possible for her to assent to what he offers, is then typically understood by Newman in terms of her sinlessness from the moment of her conception onward. This is what makes her fit to be *Deipara*, the Lord's mother. Her assent to Gabriel is an outflow or effect of this more fundamental reality.

The second organizing principle of Newman's thought about Mary, evident in both his Catholic and his Anglican periods, is typological: she is the second Eve, or, as he sometimes puts it more dramatically, she is a "daughter of Eve unfallen,"⁹ being as Eve's offspring would have been had Eve not fallen. This particular typology Newman un-

⁸ See, for example, "Our Lady in the Gospel," a homily preached in 1848, and thus before the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception. In this homily, Trent's Decree on Justification, Canon 23, is cited. Boyce, *Mary*, 170.

⁹ From the *Letter to Pusey*, in Boyce, *Mary*, 226.

derstands to be the “rudimental” teaching of the Fathers,¹⁰ by which he means that it was, for them, the trope around which all others orbit. This way of thinking about Mary yields some additional rules for discerning the appropriateness of this or that claim about Mary. So, for instance, Newman writes that “we are able, by the position and office of Eve in our fall, to determine the position and office of Mary in our restoration”;¹¹ “as Eve co-operated in effecting a great evil, Mary co-operated in effecting a much greater good”;¹² and, quoting Jerome, much more pithily, “death by Eve, life by Mary.”¹³

This typology is handled imaginatively and variously by Newman, as also by the Fathers on whom he draws. The two most common themes in it are those of sin and death. Eve was the first among humans to sin; Mary the first among humans to be sinless. Eve’s sin brought death into the world for humans; Mary’s sinlessness, under the triple aspect of having been conceived immaculately, of being free from all personal sins, venial or mortal, and of withholding nothing in her assent to Gabriel, was the condition of the possibility of removing death for humans.

The pattern of Newman’s thought about Mary’s death, in particular, shows that he is a convinced mortalist; for him, it is clear that Mary died, and that therefore it was her dead though incorrupt flesh that was assumed into heaven. Consider the following passage, from the above-mentioned homily of 1849, “On the Fitness of the Glories of Mary.”

She [Mary] died, then, as we hold, because even our Lord and Saviour dies; she died, as she suffered, because she was in this world, because she was in a state of things in which suffering and death are the rule. She lived under their external sway; and as she obeyed Caesar by coming for enrolment to Bethlehem, so did she, when God willed it, yield to the tyranny of death, and was dissolved into soul and body, as well as others. But

¹⁰ Boyce, *Mary*, 208.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 213.

¹³ Ibid., 218. Newman is quoting and ornamenting Jerome’s letter to Eustochia 22.21, from the *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 22, cols. 407–8.

though she died as well as others, she died not as others die; for through the merits of her Son, by whom she was what she was, by the grace of Christ which in her had anticipated sin, which had filled her with light which had purified her flesh from all defilement, she was also saved from disease and malady, and all that weakens and decays the bodily frame. Original sin had not been found in her, by the wear of her senses, and the waste of her frame, and the decrepitude of years, propagating death. She died, but her death was a mere fact, not an effect; and when it was over, it ceased to be. She died that she might live, she died as a matter of form or (as I may call it) an observance, in order to fulfil, what is called, the debt of nature—not primarily for herself or because of sin, but to submit herself to her condition, to glorify God, to do what her Son did; not however as her Son and Savior, with any suffering for any special end; not with a martyr's death, for her martyrdom had been in living; not as an atonement, for man could not make it and One had made it, and made it for all; but in order to finish her course and to receive her crown.¹⁴

Newman provides in this passage one fundamental reason for Mary's mortality: it is that all human persons, including Jesus Christ, are under the tyranny of death, and Mary, being of course a human person, is as much under that tyranny as the rest of us. She is mortal, and so she dies. But then the qualifications: her death was not in any way linked to bodily disease or damage and involved no suffering; it was, rather, Newman strikingly writes, "a matter of form," a "mere fact" by means of which she acknowledges and submits to her creaturely condition and to the "debt of nature" that goes with it, and thereby glorifies God. By death she finishes her course (a phrase very like that in the dogmatic definition) and then, after her assumption, receives her crown.

Newman's way of talking about Mary's death explicitly separates it from old age or bodily decay and from any kind of suffering. The sufferings that Mary does undergo are all, in his view, responsive to and participant in the sufferings of Jesus, and because her death is a

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 161–62.

moment of preparation for reunion with the one who is now ascended and beyond all suffering, it can involve no suffering for her. All this is consonant with one of the principal rationales for the definition of the dogma, which is to separate Mary from all fleshly corruption. But Newman's view goes further. Not only is she separate from fleshly corruption after death, but also before. While living, she does not age and is not subject to the kinds of sickness and damage that come from the ordinary decay of the body—as he writes, “she was also saved from disease and malady, and all that weakens and decays the bodily frame. Original sin had not been found in her, by the wear of her senses, and the waste of her frame, and the decrepitude of years, propagating death.” The decay of the body produced by age is here attributed directly to original sin, certainly as necessary condition, and probably also as sufficient. When such sin is absent, as it was in Mary, its consequences are therefore also absent.

This is a striking and unusual understanding of Mary's flesh. She is a human creature, conceived like others by the sexual intercourse of a man and a woman. She grows to maturity as others do. She conceives and bears Jesus, and in that way becomes the mother of the Lord. But then her flesh neither decays nor ages. It remains as it was at whatever age decay would have begun. The long Western tradition has often speculated about the risen flesh of the saints in just these terms: Augustine is typical when he writes that those resurrected bodies will be as if their possessors were about thirty years old, that being an age at which growth to maturity is complete and decay has not yet set in, an age, that is, at which the body is what it should be. In Newman's view, Mary's flesh during her earthly life is in every significant respect like that of those resurrected to eternal life. She was already, even in this devastated world before her assumption, as we hope to be in the life of the world to come.

This position seems strongly to suggest immortalism. If she does not age, then why should she die? Excepting violence from without, we humans die because of sickness or age, and Newman explicitly excludes those from Mary's flesh. But in the passage before us he immediately goes on to affirm that she did die, even if in a manner very different from our deaths. Her death is “a mere fact, not an effect”—not effected, that is, by sickness or age; it is a “matter of form” or, “an

observance, in order to fulfil, what is called, the debt of nature.” That last phrase, about the debt of nature, is an epigrammatic summary of the view that mortality is constitutive of human creaturehood, and therefore also of the view that mortality has nothing necessarily to do with sin, for from that, in all its kinds, Mary is completely free. What exactly does Newman mean by it? And how, following his own mariological method, does it exhibit *convenientia* to say that Mary is subject to death, and that this state of affairs explains why she dies?

Another passage, this one from the *Letter to Pusey*, is helpful in considering these questions.

We consider that in Adam she [Mary] died, as others; that she was included, together with the whole race, in Adam’s sentence; that she incurred his debt, as we do; but that, for the sake of Him who was to redeem her and us upon the Cross, to her the debt was remitted by anticipation, on her the sentence was not carried out, except indeed as regards her natural death, for she died when her time came, as others.

Here the language of debt is also used, and in a more familiar way: the debt incurred by Adam is one that entails death, and for Mary it is remitted, “except indeed as regards her natural death, for she died when her time came, as others.” But this is puzzling. If, as the language of the passage suggests, the *debitum* is the usual one of sin/death, and if Mary is by grace and holiness sinless, and has therefore had that debt remitted, why must she die? Is the natural necessity of her death, the fact of her mortality, now separate from the *debitum*? Or is it that the greater part of the burden of the debt has to do with sin, and that only a remainder, the part that yields the body’s death, is left to Mary? The latter seems the most natural reading of what Newman writes in this passage, and something like it must be right: because he wishes to say that Mary was mortal and died, and that she was free from every kind of sin, he must postulate a reason for death, which has nothing to do with sin. It remains unclear what this reason might be: what debt remains to Mary if she has been entirely cleared of the weight of sin? Newman’s pattern of reasoning here has a structure evident, and perhaps unavoidable, among those who wish to affirm both Mary’s mortality, and her

untrammelled freedom from sin. It shows the need to find some reason for death other than sin.

In a letter written in 1865 to J. R. Rhode, a Catholic barrister with whom Newman exchanged a number of letters on theological questions in the 1850s and 1860s, Newman comments on the passage from the *Letter to Pusey* just discussed:

What I have said in my *Letter* [to Pusey] was but a matter of fact, viz. that the Decree of 1854 [on the Immaculate Conception] did not deny that our Lady was under the *debitum*—that no Catholic was called to deny it—that I did not deny it—that Suarez, the greatest theological authority of these latter times, affirmed it.

I did not say that every Catholic was obliged to affirm—or that there was not a certain particular sense of the word in which divines, such as Viva and your own Jesuit author, considered that they were at liberty to deny it.

For myself, such subtleties, touch neither my heart nor my reason. They don't seem to me to add one atom of honour to our Lady—they do but deprive her Son of subjects. I do but associate them with the loss of souls. It would not lead me to say with a clearer conscience, “Per te, Virgo, sim defensus, in die judicii,” to have the misgiving within me, that by my officious zeal for her honour, I had prevented my brethren from submitting to the Catholic Church, and enjoying the blessings of Catholic communion.¹⁵

Rhode had questioned Newman's view that Mary was under a natural *debitum*, and thus mortal, and had quoted various authorities in support of the opposite, immortalist view. Newman's reply makes four points: first, that he does not regard it as a settled matter of Catholic doctrine that Mary died; there are authorities on both sides of the question, and no dogma to settle it. The 1854 definition of the immaculate conception

¹⁵ John Henry Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, vol. 22, ed. Charles Dessain (London: Nelson, 1972), 225.

requires no position on Mary's mortality and thus no position on the *debitum*. This is also true of the 1950 definition of the assumption. Second, he writes that to be mortal is necessary for being a subject of Jesus, for, we might say, being saved by Jesus from death. Denying the natural debt, and thus also Mary's mortality, seems to Newman to do nothing other than "deprive her Son of [a] subject." Newman does not say more in this letter about why this is, but it is a common theme elsewhere in his writing that what Jesus liberates us from is, above all, death, and, therefore (we can assume), that if a particular creature is not mortal, she does not, because of her immortality, need to be saved by Jesus, and is therefore in that sense not his subject.

But this view—and it is repeated often by other defenders of Mary's mortality—sits uneasily with what we have seen in the passage discussed above from the 1849 homily on the fitness of the glories of Mary, where Newman writes explicitly that Mary is redeemed by Jesus anticipatorily, proleptically as we might say. He makes the same point more briefly in the *Letter to Pusey*, as we have seen. If that is so, and it is difficult to see how else to construe the dogma of the immaculate conception, Mary is so conceived as a matter of gift, by participation in the only redemptive gift there is; there can be no other way in which the burden of sin is removed from human creatures. Therefore Mary's immortality would in no way call into question her status as a subject of Jesus, in need of redemption by him, as Newman suggests in this letter to Rhode. It would mean, rather, that her redemption is brought about differently in the temporal order than is ours, but not by any separation of her from Jesus's redemptive work. There is an internal tension here in Newman's mariological thought: he offers in this letter a reason for Mary's mortality, the necessity of which he had already removed by what he wrote in the 1849 homily and in the *Letter to Pusey*.

To return to the letter to Rhode. Newman writes there that there is no settled dogma on the question of Mary's mortality, and that suggesting her immortality removes her from Jesus's redemptive work. This second point is buttressed by a third, which is that denying mortality to Mary does not "add one atom of honour" to her. Newman does not say why not, and given his Mariological method, it is far from clear why it would not. If she is the daughter of Eve unfallen, and if

"nothing . . . is too high for her to whom God owes His human life,"¹⁶ then why would not affirming that she did not die do her honor, while still keeping her firmly within the bounds of creaturehood? Death, after all, as Newman so often writes, is the central element in what has been brought about by the primordial cataclysm of the fall. Its absence does not call creaturehood into question, as the examples of the angels and of Adam and Eve unfallen show.

The last significant point made in the letter to Rhode is that affirming immortality of Mary, or even engaging in discussion of the matter, would, Newman thinks, provide a barrier to Anglicans who might otherwise become Catholic. And he does not wish to have this burden on his conscience. To advocate, or seriously to consider, Mary's immortality would be "officious zeal for her honour," that is, both unnecessary and overweening. Newman therefore rejects it. This is the strongest motivation behind Newman's mortalism with respect to Mary. He is deeply aware of the barriers to Catholicism that Marian doctrine, usually misunderstood though it was, provided his Anglican contemporaries and peers. Addressing that matter is among the main burdens of the *Letter to Pusey*. And he seems to think that affirming Mary's assumption without death would be a barrier very difficult to get over. He is no doubt right. But it is surely no greater a barrier than his own speculation that Mary's exemption from decay and corruption extended to her life here below. Is it likely that an ageless Mary was easier for Pusey to swallow than a deathless one?

The comments in the letter to Rhode strongly suggest that Newman takes mortality to provide intimacy with Jesus by showing Mary subject to what Jesus underwent himself and what he liberates us from—namely, death—and by having her participate, like all mortals, in his death. They also show that he takes affirming immortality of Mary to be unnecessary, that is, to provide her no additional dignity. And, crucially, he does not want to be held responsible for preventing non-Catholics from becoming Catholic by addressing such Mariological subtleties as her possible immortality.

Matters are further complicated by Newman's notes for a homily delivered on the Feast of the Assumption. The year to which the hom-

¹⁶ Boyce, *Mary*, 152.

ily belongs is not definitely known, but was probably the late 1840s or early 1850s, not far distant in time from the homily on the fitness of Mary's glories (1849), of which we have the full text. As a Catholic homilist after the late 1840s, Newman appears ordinarily to have preached extemporaneously, having before him only notes and outlines, some of which survive. I provide the notes for this particular homily in full, in order to give a sense of its structure

INTROD.—*Question*.—Whether this feast, [the Assumption, is] not inconsistent with the Immaculate Conception; for why should our Lady die if she did not inherit Adam's sin? 2. *Answer*.—Because she was under the laws of fallen Nature, and inherited its evils, except so far as sin [is concerned]. Thus our Blessed Lord [suffered fatigue, pain and death]. Thus she had not perfect knowledge from the first. She had need of shelter, clothing, etc., not in a garden [as our first parents were]. 3. Hence, since all men die, she died. Our Lord died. 4. Yet even as regards the body, our Lord observed a special dispensation about her. Hence she was not only protected from diseases, but from torture, wounds, etc. 5. It was becoming that she who was *inviolata, intemerata*, should have no wound. 6. The difference between men and women as to warfare. The women protected and sit at home. How many a wife, or sister or daughter, suffers in mind, and you hear them say, "O that I were a man!" And they suffer in soul, [as the] saints about the *cross* [who were] not martyrs [suffered]. And hence Mary had a sword through her [heart]. Mental pains, like bodily. And this her pain. 7. And hence she brings before us the remarkable instance of a soul suffering, yet not the body. 8. She lived therefore to the full age of human kind. [In this she was] different from our Lord. 9. What a picture this puts before us! Fancy her thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, looking still so beautiful and young, not fading, more heavenly every year; so that she grew in beauty, and the soul always grew in grace and merit. 10. And then, fancy the increased pain at the absence of Christ, [for she lived] fifteen or sixteen years without Him! 11. On the long life and waiting of the antediluvian patriarchs—Jacob's "I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord"; Moses; Daniel; the souls in Limbo Patrum like Mary,

though the time [of her waiting] shorter. It was like purgatory, waiting for Christ's face; except with merit and not for sin. 12. Hence [it is] not wonderful [that] it is a pious belief that she died from love. This alone could kill that body. It was a *contest* between body and soul. The body so strong, the soul so desirous to see God. No disease could kill that body. What killed it? The soul, that it might get to heaven. 13. (1) By languishing; (2) by *striving* to get loose. 14. Hence [it was] fitting that, when she did get loose, her Son should not let the body be so overmatched and overcome, but at once that the soul had got the victory, He raised up the body without corruption. 15. Our Advocate in heaven.¹⁷

Newman repeats here many of the themes already discussed. He assumes Mary's mortality: that provides the question around which the homily is ordered (§1), which is exactly why Mary died. The first answer given is that she died because all creatures die, including her son (§§2–3). This is immediately qualified by the claim that Mary's body was, though mortal, invulnerable: she did not age or suffer from illness, and could not have been killed by wounds (§§4–5). The suffering she did undergo was of the heart only, and Newman connects this point to the fact that she was a woman (§§6–7). She lives on after Christ's death for "fifteen or sixteen years," by which time, following the traditional approximate chronology, she is in her sixties, and suffers purgatorially during those years while waiting to be reunited with him (§§8–11). But how then does she come to die, if her body has not aged and if she is invulnerable to all the usual causes of death? Newman's answer is quite remarkable. It is that her soul killed her body in a love suicide (§§12–13): Mary is, at last, so eager to see her risen and ascended son that she kills herself in order to do so.

This is an outlandish speculation. The idea that Mary had to kill herself, to cease to exist as a person (for that is what the death of the body means), in order that her soul might be freed for the vision of the Lord, lacks any kind of *convenientia*. It is an ugly thing, not something the Church ought predicate of our Blessed Mother. She is what Eve was and should have remained, which is to say the mother of all the living; and this speculation makes her a direct cause of her own death. It is easy enough to see why Newman's thought should have moved in this direction, however. It is one way, perhaps in the end the only remotely

plausible way, of dealing with the tension between affirming Mary's exemption from disease and decay in this life, and thinking that she died. Newman is not a fearful thinker, and here, as often, he fearlessly follows the trajectory of his thought to its conclusion, even when that conclusion is almost certainly wrong.

In light of this discussion it is easy enough to conclude, first, that Newman does not present an entirely consistent understanding of Mary's mortality. His extravagant speculation about her suicide cannot stand easily with the talk of natural death and the *debitum* found in the texts discussed earlier in this essay. What the speculative position in the sermon notes does show, as do the dismissive comments about mariological subtleties, is that Newman is not terribly interested in giving a speculative-theological account of why Mary is mortal. He takes her mortality as a majority view, patristic, medieval, and modern, and he is quite right to do so. He affirms it in accord with that majority, as a datum of the tradition. But he cannot see how to account for it. The difficulty is especially sharp for him because of the force of his affirmation of the Eve-Mary typology. The nexus between sin and death is deep and powerful in that typology, and to take it in the direction that Newman does, is almost ineluctably to be led in the direction of understanding Mary as Eve would have been had she not fallen. And that means immortal, not mortal. On the other side, apart from the weight of the tradition, there is only the inchoate sense that if Mary does not die she is not as intimate with Jesus as she would otherwise have been; and that if we say that Mary does not die, we must also say that she was not saved from death by him, not brought into eternal life by dying and rising with him. But this is not remotely probative: it is easily dealt with, as the dogma of the immaculate conception implies, by saying that her salvation is brought about proleptically by the work of Jesus, and thus that she does not need to die in order to participate in it just as she does not need to sin in order to participate in the deliverance from sin brought about by Jesus.

What might Newman have said about Mary's mortality if he had not been so concerned about throwing up unnecessary barriers to potential Anglican converts? If he had not been so impatient with mariological subtleties, and if he had known that the dogmatic definition of the assumption would leave open the question of Mary's death? He

might have said that Mary did not die; that her soul was never separated from her body; and that the fundamental reason for this is that she had already been redeemed from sin and death by the grace of the most holy Trinity at work in her immaculate conception and her separation thereafter from all sin—that this is exactly the mode of her redemption. Newman's consistent emphasis on Mary's holiness as condition for her status as Mother of God, rather than as consequent upon the *fiat* that initiated her motherhood, fits very well with this view. And this version of immortalism makes sense, as well, of the deep link between sin and death, and the oddity—the lack of *convenientia*—of speaking, as Newman does, of a natural death-debt that has nothing to do with sin. There is no strong speculative or dogmatic reason why there ought to be any such natural *debitum* independent of sin, and Newman provides no explanation. And, lastly, to gloss Newman's outlandish speculation in the sermon notes, I should think that Mary would have been eager to have in heaven the kind of relation she had here below with Jesus, which was a deeply personal one. The ascent of her soul to heaven would not have provided this, for a separated soul, as the Catholic tradition is virtually unanimous in asserting, is not, properly speaking, a human person. The fullness of the beatific vision for humans—and thus also for Mary—requires flesh; the “soul so desirous to see God,” if confident of its entry into eternal life and its freedom from death's necessity, as Mary on Newman's account was, would be content to await its assumption together with its otherwise immortal body, rather than to separate itself from that body with an eager but fatal force.

This is the furthest limit of mariological speculation. The constructive way forward is to consider more fully what a Mary who did not die shows us about our own fleshliness and our own subjection to sin, and about the nature of the relation between sin, death, and the flesh more generally considered.

Newman should have the last word. The quotation below is from his meditation on Mary as *Rosa Mystica*. It sits well with immortalism, and it is beautiful.

Excepting her [Mary], the fairest rose in the paradise of God has had upon it blight, and has had the risk of canker-worm

and locust. All but Mary; she from the first was perfect in her sweetness and her beautifulness, and at length when the angel Gabriel had to come to her, he found her “full of grace,” which had, from her good use of it, accumulated in her from the first moment of her being.¹⁸ 

¹⁸ Boyce, *Mary*, 373.