

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven: Faith, Dogma, and Eschatology

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Introduction

I WOULD LIKE TO INVITE the esteemed readers of this essay to enter into a “what if” thought experiment.¹ What if we were to bracket for the duration of reading this article a notion of “faith” we might have encountered in recent Catholic theology, a notion of a “faith” that all people hold at least implicitly in virtue of our purportedly universally graced existence, a nonthematic faith in transcendence, meaning, and goodness, a faith that in light of the state of the world is always paired with doubt, a faith that can at best be solidified into a strong opinion, maybe even into a conviction, but that remains always tentative and always open to revision in light of possible new and conflicting evidences

¹ Versions of this essay were delivered as lectures on April 28, 2013, at the Monastery of Our Lady of Grace, North Guilford, CT, and much earlier, on September 27, 2008, at a Symposium on Mariology at the University of Dallas in Dallas, TX. I remember with deep gratitude the hospitality my colleagues and I enjoyed at the Cistercian Monastery, the instructive conversations on Mariology with Fr. Roch Kereszty, O. Cist., and then Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy, O.Cist., as well as with my co-symposiasts John Cavadini, Paul J. Griffiths, and Bruce Marshall. I am indebted to the substantive feedback I received from Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P., feedback I attempted to integrate into the article as fully as possible, and for comments and suggestions from the Dominican Nuns and, last but not least, from Nancy Heitzenrater Hütter.

or simply more compelling alternatives. What if we were to bracket this all too widespread notion of faith, the faith of the seeker, the faith based on the measure of our own private judgment? What if instead we had a dream? What if we were to dream that faith in all of its aspects was a gift given directly from God to each one of us personally? What if we were to dream that faith was based on a testimony that ultimately comes from God and that we believe to come from God and therefore are able to hold with absolute certainty because we believe God? What if this faith were to contain distinct truths communicated by God by way of entrusted messengers whom we believe because we believe them to be God's messengers entrusted by God with the testimony that conveys distinct truths about God? What if this faith were part and parcel of our friendship with God, a friendship enabled, initiated, and ensured by God, such that the knowledge conveyed by faith were always inherently part of the personal friendship initiated by God and indeed inherently part of an inchoate union with God? What if faith were "the substance of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen" (Heb 11:1), so that "through faith, in a tentative way, or as we might say 'in embryo'—and thus according to the 'substance'—there [were] already present in us the things that are hoped for: a whole, true life"?² What if—lest this faith become wayward and ossified—God had appointed guardians of the faith that would allow it to grow and to remain faithful to the truth conveyed by God? And what if the faith itself were certain about these guardians of the faith and certain that God would guide these guardians through the Holy Spirit? Would it not be most appropriate to call such a faith, a faith that has its origin and end in God, a faith that is a gift from God and anchored in God's truthfulness—*divine* faith?³

Because the dreaming goes so well, let us go on for a moment and ask, what if a contemporary theologian had put this matter into a compelling contemporary theological idiom. For example, the following way:

The sole objectivity of the faith is the subjectivity of the Church.
For the objectivity of the faith is guaranteed by the Spirit of

² Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* §7.

³ For a more detailed discussion of "divine faith," see my recent article "What Is Faith? The Theocentric, Unitive, and Eschatologically Inchoative Character of Divine Faith," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 2 (2013): 317–40.

God, who judges everything, but is judged by nobody. This Spirit, however, is present in the Church as her subjectivity and nowhere else present [as such]. One cannot want to apply the final measure oneself. The final measure, insofar as it is tangible at all, is the Church from that moment on that the Spirit of Truth has united Himself with her, and with me, the individual only insofar as I stand in the Church and insofar as I have handed over my faith into hers. . . . Because [the Church] in freedom overpowered by the Spirit, is always the obedient servant of the truth—in this way alone, but in this way also unconditionally, is [the Church] the one who rules over our faith. . . . Faith is faith that hears the Church and believes in the Church.⁴

Let us continue our dream. What if this theologian were Karl Rahner and what if he had written these words in the opening pages of a book on the dogma of the Assumption, a book that he never published during his life? And what if he were to recommend the following attitude for approaching theologically the mystery of the assumption of the Blessed Virgin? Consider again the Karl Rahner from 1951:

What is the right beginning for our endeavor to understand what the Church proclaims about the Holy Virgin and her eternal destiny? The humble reverence (*Ehrfurcht*) in face of the mystery of God, a reverence in which the human being does not make himself the measure of truth, and the unconditional faith in relationship to the Church and her teaching and in the Church as the necessary medium of our own understanding of the faith, a faith that is the measure for everything else and that can be measured only by itself and no other criteria.⁵

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Maria, Mutter des Herrn: Mariologische Studien*, vol. 9, *Sämtliche Werke* (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 13–14 (my translation). The quotation is taken from Karl Rahner's 1951 monograph *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*, which was published for the first time only in the posthumous edition of his complete works. For detailed information about the reasons for this delayed publication, see Regina Pacis Meyer's instructive introduction to the volume (xi–lv). I am indebted to Fr. Richard Schenk, O.P., for having brought to my attention Karl Rahner's "hidden" Mariological treatise.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 (my translation).

What if we were to assume this framework of divine faith? Equipped with the reverence Rahner recommends, we would encounter the following as a teaching of the faith that makes divine faith explicit in one specific regard: “We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.” Thus states the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary as it was defined and promulgated by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950, in the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*.⁶ The dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin into heaven, body and soul, expresses a truth integral to the divine faith we have come presently to assume. The truth made explicit and specified (we could also say “defined”) in the dogma belongs to the essence of divine faith; it is an article of this faith as much as the articles specified in the Apostolic and the Nicene Creed, that is, among others, that God is triune, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God incarnate, that he was raised from the dead on the third day and ascended into heaven. All of these truths and numerous others are divinely revealed and therefore integral to divine faith.⁷

⁶ “Pronunciamus, declaramus et definimus divinitus revelatum dogma esse: Immaculatam Deiparam semper Virginem Mariam, expleto terrestres vitae cursu, fuisse corpore et anima ad caelestem gloriam assumptam” (DH 3903; Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed., ed. Peter Hünermann [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010], 809).

⁷ Unsurprisingly, therefore, *Munificentissimus Deus* clearly states: “Hence, if anyone, which God forbid, should dare willfully to deny or call into doubt that which We have defined, let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic faith” (“Quamobrem, si quis, quod Deus advertat, id vel negare, vel in dubium vocare voluntarie ausus fuerit, quod a Nobis definitum est, noverit se a divina ac catholica fide prorsus defecisse [DH 3904]). For further clarification, see “Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*,” issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on June 29, 1998. In paragraph 11, the commentary states: “To the truths of the first paragraph belong the articles of the faith of the Creed, the various Christological dogmas and Marian dogmas; the doctrine of the institution of the sacraments by Christ and their efficacy with regard to grace; the doctrine of the real and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the sacrificial nature of the eucharistic celebration; the foundation of the Church by the will of Christ; the doctrine on the primacy and infallibility of the Roman Pontiff; the doctrine on the existence of original sin; the doctrine on the immortality of the spiritual soul and on the immediate recompense after death; the absence of error in the inspired sacred texts; the doctrine on the grave immorality of direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being.”

In the following theological meditation I am going to be true to the thought experiment and presuppose the truth of the dogma as integral to the divine faith we presently assume “as if.” Given divine faith, I will explore the truth itself that the dogma conveys. I will first consider the antecedent revealed truths that give rise to the Church’s faith in the assumption of the Blessed Virgin into heaven. These antecedent revealed truths afford divine faith an indispensable understanding of the surpassing theological fittingness of her assumption. Of course, God’s omnipotence makes it possible for God to assume any human being into heaven, body and soul—presupposing in this counterfactual, of course, that the instantaneous sanctification of this person by operative grace would be a necessary entailment of such an act of divine omnipotence. Fittingness, *convenientia*, however, assumes that God orders all the works of salvation wisely and that divine faith is enabled by God to trace the wisdom of such ordering and to praise the beauty of such wisdom. By way of interpreting a brief meditation by Thomas Aquinas I will suggest how the assumption of the Blessed Virgin roots theologically in her plenitude of grace and in her divine motherhood.

Given the assumption of the Blessed Virgin into heaven, I will then consider, albeit only briefly, the most salient ecclesiological and eschatological consequences of this revealed truth of divine faith. As the dogmatic theologian Louis Bouyer states in his important book *The Seat of Wisdom*, “her Assumption is the pledge of the glory Christ will give to his Spouse, as he has already given it to his Mother.”⁸

Gratia plena—Deipara—Assumpta

Let us consider Thomas Aquinas’s theological meditation on the angel’s salutation *Ave, gratia plena*, a piece Thomas composed in the year 1269. The work falls into the early part of Thomas’s second Parisian regency, the period during which he commenced and completed the enormous *Secunda Pars* of the *Summa theologiae* (ST).⁹ In this brief but never-

⁸ Louis Bouyer, *The Seat of Wisdom: An Essay on the Place of the Virgin Mary in Christian Theology*, trans. A. V. Littledale (New York: Pantheon, 1962), 202.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, “In salutationem angelicam vulgo ‘Ave Maria’ expositio” (1269), *Opuscula Theologica*, vol. II (Turin: Marietti, 1954), 239–41. Translated into English as *The Angelic Salutation*, trans. Joseph B. Collins (New York: Wagner, 1939). Concerning the exact date on which Thomas delivered this sermon, see the instruc-

theless rich theological meditation on the angel's salutation, Thomas demonstrates well how the Church's faith moves from the Virgin Mary's plenitude of grace to her divine motherhood and from her divine motherhood to her assumption into heaven. Thomas's brief treatise is rooted in a thoroughly *theological* reading of the Sacred Scriptures and thus helps us see that the Church's faith in the assumption of the Blessed Virgin arises from the witness of the Sacred Scriptures. For Thomas's theological meditation allows us to understand the assumption immediately in relationship to the plenitude of grace residing in the Blessed Virgin and in relationship to her divine motherhood, two truths shining forth from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. To put it differently: Given the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, a truth solemnly defined on December 8, 1854, by Pope Pius IX in the Bull *Ineffabilis*, her assumption does indeed follow as a fitting consequence in the economy of salvation. However, we would seriously misunderstand the Church's faith in the assumption of the Blessed Virgin into heaven if in hindsight we were to reduce this truth of divine faith to a mere necessary entailment of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Rather, it is important for a full appreciation of the meaning of the assumption to realize and remember that the truth of the Blessed Virgin Mary's assumption into heaven is a direct consequence of the witness of the Gospel of Luke itself, namely, a witness of the plenitude of grace that resides in her and a witness of her divine motherhood.

As is well known, Thomas did not teach the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary in her mother's womb. Rather, at a time when a va-

tive commentary and notes provided by Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., in Saint Thomas d'Aquin, *Somme Theologique. Le Verbe Incarné en ses mystères. Tome 1: L'entrée du Christ en ce monde* (ST III, qq. 27–34) (Paris: Cerf, 2003), 363; *Recherches thomasiennes: Études revues et augmentées* (Paris: Vrin, 2000), 285n4. Torrell provides a French translation in *Le Verbe Incarné*, 363–70. Also important findings by Torrell are the appendix “S. Thomas et la vierge Marie,” 340–53, esp. 368n1, and the “notes explicatives,” esp. 264–68. For recent treatments of Thomas's Mariology, see T. A. Mullaney, O.P., “Mary Immaculate in the Writings of St. Thomas,” *The Thomist* 17 (1954): 433–68; Daniel Ols, O.P., “La Bienheureuse Vierge Marie selon saint Thomas,” in *Littera Sensus Sententia: Studi in onore del Prof. Clemente J. Vansteenkiste, O.P.*, ed. Abelardo Lobato, O.P. (Milan: Massimo, 1991), 435–53; and Aidan Nichols, O.P., “The Mariology of St. Thomas,” in *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 241–60.

riety of theological positions were still explored and defended, Thomas taught the perfect sanctification of the Blessed Virgin in her mother's womb immediately after the ensoulment (which Thomas assumed—based on the best scientific theory of his day—did not occur right at conception). Ironically, from the hindsight of the development of doctrine, it is this particular trait of Thomas's Mariology that lends special significance to his brief treatise. *For it allows us to attend to the direct theological relationship between the plenitude of grace present in the Blessed Virgin and her divine maternity, on the one side, and her assumption into heaven, body and soul, on the other side.* In short, Thomas's meditation allows us—in hindsight, after the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* on December 8, 1854—to realize that, indeed, her immaculate conception is for the sake of her divine maternity, while her assumption is a culmination of both of these prior graces.¹⁰

How does Thomas proceed in his brief meditation? First, he points out something contemporary readers of Scripture would most likely fail to notice, namely, that wherever in the Sacred Scriptures angels encounter human beings it is never the angel who greets and expresses reverence to the human being—with the sole exception of the Annunciation. Thomas gives three reasons why it is improper, under normal circumstances, for angels to express reverence to humans, but why it is quite proper and decent for human beings to do so in regard to angels.

First, angels surpass human beings in ontological dignity. For angels have a spiritual and incorruptible nature while humans have a corruptible one. Second, angels are of the utmost familiarity with God and, in addition, are God's assistants in the order of providence as well as in

¹⁰ For a detailed elaboration of the preeminence of the divine maternity and of the predestination of the Blessed Virgin to divine maternity as the final cause of her immaculate conception (Christ's salvific death on the Cross being the meritorious cause) and as the root cause, the principle, that comes to full realization first in her association with Christ's suffering and death and then also her eternal association with Christ in his perfect victory, see the unjustly forgotten Mariology by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Mother of The Saviour and Our Interior Life*, trans. Bernard J. Kelly, C.S.Sp. (Dublin: Golden Eagle), 1949.

the economy of salvation, while human beings, due to sin, are in and of themselves unrelated to and far removed from God. Third, and most importantly, angels enjoy the surpassing splendor of divine grace; they participate in the divine light itself to the highest degree. It is for this reason, Thomas surmises, that an angel always appears with light. Human beings, however, even if they participate in the light of grace, do so only to a small degree and in a somewhat obscure manner. Now, according to the Gospel of Luke, the angel indeed explicitly greets the Virgin Mary and pays her reverence. And this is the case, Thomas argues, because the Blessed Virgin exceeds the angel in at least three regards.

First, she exceeds the angel in the degree of grace, for the plenitude of grace indicates a maximum of perfection that the Holy Scriptures attest nowhere about any angel.¹¹ Thomas regards this truth to be established simply on the basis of the witness that the literal sense of the Holy Scriptures affords. According to Thomas, the plenitude of grace is of surpassing significance and constitutes the fundamental principle of Mariology. The plenitude of grace pertains, first, to the soul of the Blessed Virgin such that she is enabled perfectly to do good and avoid sin, and, second, to her body, in that the overflow (*redundantia*) of grace from her soul to her body enables her to give birth to the Son of God.¹² Finally, the plenitude of grace pertains, third, to the restitution (*refusio*) of grace in all human beings. Thomas emphasizes in this important third aspect of her plenitude of grace that the Virgin Mary is the only

¹¹ By way of a handy summary, we can turn for one brief moment to the *Summa theologiae*, where Thomas in the third part considers the Mother of God in the proper theological context of Christology. Here is his argument why she indeed received in the womb the plenitude of grace: "In every genus, the nearer a thing is to the principle, the greater the part which it has in the effect of that principle, whence Dionysius says (Coel. Hier. iv) that angels, being nearer to God, have a greater share than men, in the effects of the Divine goodness. Now Christ is the principle of grace, authoritatively as to his Godhead, instrumentally as to His humanity: whence (Jn 1:17) it is written: Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. But the Blessed Virgin Mary was nearest to Christ in His humanity: because He received His human nature from her. Therefore it was due to her to receive a greater fulness of grace than others" (ST III, q. 27, a. 5).

¹² Thomas Aquinas, "In salutationem angelicam vulgo 'Ave Maria' expositio" (Marietti no. 1115–17).

other person apart from Christ (considered in his humanity) to receive grace for every other human being.¹³

Second, the Blessed Virgin exceeds the angel in divine familiarity. The angel expresses this in the sentence “The Lord is with you.” And this, Thomas points out, is the case in three utterly unique ways: First of all, Father and Son together have a familiarity with her in a way different from any other creature, angel or human: “The child to be born of you will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:35b; RSV). Moreover, due to being in her womb, God the Son has a familiarity with the Blessed Virgin, indeed as a son, while he has familiarity with the angel only as Lord but not as Son. In short, while God is the angel’s Lord, God is also the

¹³ Ibid. (no. 1118). Nota bene: The Blessed Virgin did not receive this grace simply as a passive instrument of the Holy Spirit, but precisely as a human person, endowed with a principle of agency and of cooperation with God’s grace. Being full of grace allows her to perform an act of perfect freedom, the freedom of realizing the surpassing good God enables her by grace to realize: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38; RSV). And therefore the Blessed Virgin *merited* the grace for every other human being. Lest the charge of an undue exaltation of the Virgin Mary be put at the feet of Thomas Aquinas (and the whole preconciliar Mariology, for that matter), let me emphasize that the Blessed Virgin merited *de congruo proprie* (congruously) what Jesus merited *de condigno* (in strict justice). Thomas explains how such meriting *de congruo* is based on friendship with God: “One may merit the first grace for another congruously: because [a person] in grace fulfills God’s will, and it is congruous and in harmony with friendship that God should fulfill [that person’s] desire for the salvation of another, although sometimes there may be an impediment on the part of him whose salvation the just [person] desires” (ST I-II, q. 114, a. 6). In reference to this passage, Garrigou-Lagrange offers a pertinent and indeed famous example: “In this way, a good christian [sic] mother, for example, can by her good works, her love of God and of her neighbour, merit the conversion of her son *de congruo proprie*. St. Monica obtained the conversion of St. Augustine by that kind of merit as well as by her prayers: ‘The son of many tears,’ said St Ambrose, ‘could not be lost.’” *Mother of The Saviour*, 180–81. Because the Mother of God, due to her plenitude of grace, has the highest degree possible for a human being of friendship with God, she merits *de congruo proprie* in virtue of the rights of friendship (*in iure amicitiae*), the grace for every human being. See Pope St. Pius X’s Encyclical Letter *Ad diem illum* from February 2, 1904, for a magisterial confirmation of the Blessed Virgin as mediatrix of grace: “We are . . . very far from attributing to the Mother of God a productive power of grace—a power that belongs to God alone. Yet, since Mary carries it over all in holiness and union with Christ and has been associated by Christ in the work of redemption, she merits for us *de congruo* [in a congruous manner], in the language of the theologians, what Christ merits for us *de condigno* [in a condign manner], and she is the supreme minister of the distribution of graces” (DH 3371).

Virgin Mary's Son.¹⁴ This single circumstance makes her indeed the single most important creature of the whole universe. And finally, the Holy Spirit has familiarity with her because he overshadows her and hence dwells in her as in the temple. Consequently, according to Thomas, God has greater familiarity with the Virgin Mary than with any angel, because Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the whole Trinity, is with her. And so the angel rightly expresses reverence to the Blessed Virgin. For she is the mother of the Lord, *mater Domini*, hence *Domina*, and therefore worthy of surpassing reverence.

But the Blessed Virgin not only exceeds the angel in plenitude of grace and in familiarity with God. Rather, and this is the third aspect, Thomas emphasizes that she exceeds the angel also in regard to purity. After having received the plenitude of grace, the Virgin Mary is free from any form of sin (original, mortal, and venial) and in that of similar purity as the angel, but different from the angel, she is also—in virtue of her divine maternity—the source of purity in others. Hence her purity surpasses that of the most pure and holy creature, the angel.

At this juncture we need to halt for a moment and recapitulate in order to appreciate the full import of Thomas's brief account so far. The triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, abides with the Virgin Mary in an utterly singular way and hence has familiarity with her to a degree that exceeds God's familiarity with any other creature. To put it differently, according to the witness of the Sacred Scriptures, as divine faith receives it under the guidance of the Church's teaching and as Thomas understands it through the medium of divine faith, the Blessed Virgin holds that very place of singularity in the universe that according to the erroneous assumptions of the adoptionist Christological heresy Jesus holds. Jesus was not a human person adopted by God and elevated to the highest level of adoptive divinity possible for a creature—as was held by ancient adoptionism long ago and was held in recent times and still is held in present times by strands of liberal Protestantism and Catholic Modernism. Rather, the Blessed Virgin was the distinct human person chosen by God for divine maternity and because of it was eventually

¹⁴ Indeed, as Thomas emphasizes in the *Summa theologiae*, the Virgin Mary is the mother of the person of the Son—the person of the Son being the Incarnate Logos (ST III, q. 35, a. 4 co., ad 2 and 3).

assumed, body and soul, into the glory of heaven. The principle *gratia plena* constitutes her whole existence from beginning to end. Mary is the most fully divinized human person from the moment of her coming into existence, as the particular human being she is, to her glorification in heaven. While Thomas has no particular reason to state the matter in the context of his interpretation of the angelic salutation, in an ecumenical post-Reformation setting it is important, however, to mention explicitly that the Catholic Church recognizes the privilege of the Virgin Mary's preservation from original sin and her existence *gratia plena* in light of the merits of Christ, just as analogically she is associated in prayer in the mystery of the Cross, only because of the merits of her Son and in dependence upon them.

Now we are prepared to turn to the section of Thomas's meditation where the assumption is mentioned—indeed very briefly, but completely as a matter of fact, not at all as something that is up for debate or in need of an elaborate theological defense or justification. Due to the fullness of grace residing in her, the Blessed Virgin Mary was free from any stain of sin. For this very reason she was also preserved from the curse of sin. Thomas only briefly gestures to the curses of Genesis 3:16–19. Interestingly, he does not distinguish between the curses applying to the man and those applying to the woman. For Thomas states that in every regard the curse of sin was not going to affect her. There is first Genesis 3:16a: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children” (RSV). Contrary to this curse, Thomas in accord with the received tradition states that the Blessed Virgin conceives the Son of God without loss of her virginity (*sine corruptione*), bears him in consolation (*in solatione*), and gives birth to him in joy (*in gaudio*). She is, second, preserved from having to eat bread in the sweat of her face (Gen 3:19) because, according to St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, virgins are released from the solicitude of this world and are free for God alone. And finally and most importantly, the Blessed Virgin is preserved from the common destiny of humanity to have to return to the dust. “And from this,” Thomas states, “the Blessed Virgin was preserved, because of her bodily assumption into heaven. For we believe that after her death she was raised up again and

borne to heaven.”¹⁵ He concludes by citing Psalm 132(131):8: “Arise, O Lord, and go to thy resting place, thou and the ark of thy might” (RSV). Because Christ’s humanity, in virtue of divine election and predestination, is the all-sufficient and hence all-powerful instrument of human salvation and because Christ receives his humanity from the Blessed Virgin, she can indeed rightly be considered the ark of God’s might. And if indeed she is the latter she must be preserved from all stains of sin, original, mortal, and venial. For otherwise she could not be the ark in which the Spirit of God dwells. At this point it should at least be mentioned that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin does provide greater clarity. For the dogma of the Immaculate Conception allows a more penetrating theological understanding of the fact that, like every other human being after the fall, the Virgin Mary incurred the *debt* of original sin.¹⁶ However, unlike every other human being after the fall, she was preserved from incurring the *stain* of original sin from the first instance of her existence. To put the matter differently: The grace of the Blessed Virgin is not “Adamic,” it is not a grace “stretching forth” so to speak from the state of original righteousness to the Virgin Mary. Rather, her grace is “Christic.” Unlike every other human being after the fall, she is free from sin in virtue of her immaculate conception, but like every other human being after the fall and like the human nature of Christ, she is subject to imperfections and has the capacity to suffer and die. She is *plena gratia* and sinless, but in complete conformity with the suffering and death of Christ by whom her grace is merited. Precisely because

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, “In salutationem angelicam vulgo ‘Ave Maria’ expositio” (Marietti no. 1123): “Et ab hac immunis fuit Beata Virgo, quia cum corpore assumpta est in caelum. Credimus enim quod post mortem resuscitata fuerit, et portata in caelum. Psal. CXXXI, 8: ‘Surge, Domine, in requiem tuam; tu, et arca sanctificationis tuae.’” For the theologically delicate question of whether the Blessed Virgin underwent death, see note 17 below.

¹⁶ Arguably, this is what Thomas intends to maintain in *ST* III, q. 27, a. 5, ad 2, where he holds that if some human being after the fall had not contracted original sin, “this would be derogatory to the dignity of Christ, by reason of His being the universal Saviour of all.” It is here that Thomas does not make the distinction between the debt of original sin that indeed pertains to all human beings (and that distinguishes Christ also from Mary and makes him also her savior) from incurring the stain (from which Mary was preserved in virtue the merits of Jesus Christ the Saviour of the human race).

her grace is Christ-conforming, it leads her into an exemplary union with the paschal mystery.

What does it mean to be preserved from the consequences of original sin? Original humanity before the fall was not preserved naturally from death. Rather, like other composite creatures due to a composite nature, the human being is in principle vulnerable to decomposition and corruption. Hence the preservation of original humanity from natural death was a fortification that original humanity received as part of the gifts of original righteousness and sanctifying grace. Due to preservation, growth, and perseverance in sanctifying grace, at the eventual point of natural death there would have occurred a transference, body and soul, into heaven. If the plenitude of grace that the Virgin Mary received exceeded that of the angel, and if her familiarity with God also exceeded the one the angel has with God, she must in both exceed original humanity or at least not lack anything in regard to anything that original humanity had received in the state of original righteousness. That means first and foremost that the consequences of the fall, the withdrawal of original sanctifying grace and the destruction of the state of original righteousness do not apply to her. Hence what was taken from original humanity and has been superabundantly restored and surpassed by Christ's salvific death and resurrection is already realized in and for the Blessed Virgin.¹⁷

¹⁷ Unfortunately, I am not able to include into this meditation a proper treatment of the Blessed Virgin's conformity to the Cross, a treatment necessary, it seems to me, to approach rightly the theologically delicate question of whether the Mother of God underwent death. As is well known, an older Eastern tradition holds that she died, while a more recent Western tradition holds that she underwent a kind of exaltation to God without death in an ecstatic spiritual love. As a brief substitute for a proper treatment, I shall adduce two theological authorities, the former having been the teacher and doctoral advisor of the latter. First I shall turn again to Garrigou-Lagrangé's *Mother of The Saviour*, a superb preconiliar Mariology that incidentally is fully compatible with the Mariology of the Second Vatican Council and that, according to my understanding advances an interpretation of the death of the Blessed Virgin that succeeds in synthesizing the central concerns of the Eastern and the Western traditions: "Man was not made immortal at the beginning otherwise than by a special privilege. The Incarnate Word willed to take passible flesh. Mary's flesh was passible too. Thus the deaths of Jesus and Mary were consequences of the inherent weakness of human nature left to itself and unsustained by any preternatural gift. Jesus, however, mastered death by accepting it for our salvation. Mary united herself to Him in His death, making for us the sacrifice of His life in the most generous mar-

Maria Assumpta: Realized Anticipation of the Church's End

On the basis of what has been said so far it might seem as if the assumption of the Blessed Virgin would separate her most radically from us: the Virgin Mary highly exalted, body and soul in the glory of God and perfectly conformed to Christ, her son. What does the Blessed Virgin have to do with us and what, in turn, we with her? Do not the unique privileges of the Mother of God separate her categorically from us?¹⁸ Continuing our thought experiment that divine faith indeed obtains, at least three theological conclusions are to be drawn.

First, in the Blessed Virgin, assumed body and soul into heaven, the economy of salvation is present as completed, as having already reached its *telos* in one human person. This is first and foremost the case—as elaborated in the first part—because of the Blessed Virgin's singular re-

tyrdom of heart the world has ever known after that of Our Saviour. And when, later on, the hour of her own death arrived, the sacrifice of her life had been already made. It remained but to renew it in that most perfect form which tradition speaks of as death of love, a death, that is to say, in which the soul dies not simply in grace or in God's love, but *of* a calm and supremely strong love which draws the soul, now ripe for heaven, away from the body to be united to God in immediate and eternal vision. Mary's last moments are described by St. John Damascene in the words 'She died an extremely peaceful death'" (*Mother of The Saviour*, 135–36). The second theological authority I shall adduce is Pope St. John Paul II, who addressed the question in his general audience of June 25, 1997: "It is true that in revelation death is present as a punishment for sin. However, the fact that the Church proclaims Mary free from original sin by a unique divine privilege does not lead to the conclusion that she also received physical immortality. The Mother is not superior to the Son who underwent death, giving it a new meaning and changing it into a means of salvation. Involved in Christ's redemptive work and associated in his saving sacrifice, Mary was able to share in his suffering and death for the sake of humanity's redemption. What Severus of Antioch says about Christ also applies to her: 'Without a preliminary death, how could the resurrection have taken place?' . . . To share in Christ's resurrection, Mary had first to share in his death. . . . Whatever from the physical point of view was the organic, biological cause of the end of her bodily life, it can be said that for Mary the passage from this life to the next was the full development of grace in glory, so that no death can ever be so fittingly described as a 'dormition' as hers" (Pope John Paul II, *Theotókos—Woman, Mother, Disciple: A Catechesis on Mary, Mother of God* [Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2000], 201–2).

¹⁸ For a lucid and profound theological treatment that completely diffuses this concern that is often put on the threshold of what some regard as a troubling "high Mariology" reflective of a purported "fulfillment theology," see Thomas Joseph White, O.P., "The Virgin Mary and the Church: The Marian Exemplarity of Ecclesial Faith," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 2 (2013): 375–405.

lation to Christ as Mother of God. This unique relation is integral to the incarnation of the Word of God and reaches its perfection in the everlasting presence, body and soul, of the mother with her Son in the eternal glory of God. One of the great Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, a convert from Lutheranism and now somewhat unjustly forgotten, put the matter succinctly in *The Seat of Wisdom*, published about ten years after the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption, but still before the Second Vatican Council. The passage merits being quoted in full:

Each one of these souls, these living members of Christ and his Spouse who make but one flesh in one and the same Spirit, will remain distinct, all the more so in that each brings its own indispensable element to the harmony of universal charity. But, if there is one distinguished forever from all the rest by a role, a quality, a gift of grace of incomparable excellence, it is Mary herself. For Mary will forever remain the person through whom the Word was born in the world, and the one through whom his Spouse was born for him, by means of his death. Mary will ever express within Christ's Spouse, the Church, what, in her, transcends even the quality of Spouse, namely, divine Motherhood. This incomparable dignity, which, in and for the Church, belongs personally to Mary alone, will be invested with so great splendour because it shows forth the greatest condescension of grace, the most amazing token of the divine love for the creature, namely, the *kenosis* of the eternal Son who made his creature child of God.

In this way, Mary is the realization in a single person, at the centre and, we might say, the culmination of history, of all that is most noble and perfect to be realised by the whole world at the end of history. All the graces given to each person, just as, before her, they led up to the grace which was hers, so, from now on, flow from her. In her grace as Mother of God, she is full of grace in an absolute sense. She prefigures, and, as it were, pre-contains all the graces the Church will ever receive; and the supreme grace, uniquely transcendent, of mother of grace itself

in its divine source, belongs to the Church and testifies, within it, to its quality of Spouse, only because it belongs for ever to Mary, the first and surpassing realisation of the Church whose collective personality is realised only in individual persons.¹⁹

The Blessed Virgin lives already now the fulfillment of human life in the beatific vision, united in love with God for which human beings were originally created and toward which they were ordered by original righteousness and elevated by sanctifying grace. The final end of humanity and the ensuing perfect happiness are realized in the Blessed Virgin Mary—the complete embodied human perfection united by intellect and will with God. The present life of the Mother of God in heaven is infinitely more real than ours, a life of surpassing completion and perfection, a life without the imperfections of sin, natural evil, the fallibility and corruptibility of material substances, of contingency, and of death, but in virtue of the participation in the divine life, a life of infinite compassion and mercy—all of this fully human in personal, embodied identity.

Second, *Maria Assumpta* is the anticipated *Eschaton* in history. Together with Christ the head of the Church, she as one fully belonging to the Church already now constitutes the transhistorical perfection of the Church. This is at least what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council teach. Consider section 63 of *Lumen Gentium*:

The blessed Virgin, through the gift and office of the divine motherhood which unites her with the Son the redeemer, and by reason of her singular graces and gifts, is also intimately united to the church: the mother of God is the type of the church, as already St. Ambrose used to teach, that is to say, in the order of faith, hope, and charity and perfect union with Christ. For in the mystery of the church, which is also rightly called mother and virgin, the blessed virgin Mary has taken precedence, providing in a pre-eminent and singular manner the exemplar both as virgin and as mother.²⁰

¹⁹ Bouyer, *Seat of Wisdom*, 200–201. The English translation appeared first in England in 1960.

²⁰ Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, Trent–Vatican II (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 896.

Consider, furthermore, the date of the dogma's promulgation: Instead of being promulgated on August 15, the ancient feast day of the Assumption, the dogma was promulgated on November 1, the feast day of All Saints. I take the theological significance of this remarkable circumstance to be the following: While in virtue of her divine motherhood being the first and foremost of the communion of saints, the Virgin Mary does as such belong inherently to the communion of saints. For she is, after all, a human person, a creature, all the way down. Hence her assumption, body and soul, into heaven pertains profoundly to the whole communion of saints. Again, Louis Bouyer puts the matter into succinct theological terms:

Just as in Mary was first effected that perfect union with Christ on the Cross that the whole Church is to realise in the course of its history, so the perfect union with Christ in glory was also accomplished in Mary, as soon as her earthly history was ended, as it will be accomplished for the whole Church at the end of all history. . . .

Christ's Ascension does not mean that he has left us to our present condition, since he has gone only to prepare a place for us, that where he is we also may be; no more does Mary's Assumption mean her separation from us. As her Son is represented in the epistle to the Hebrews as *semper vivens ad interpellandum pro nobis* (7:23), so she remains, as the constant belief of the Church assures us, at his side, the interceder *par excellence*. Already, her blessedness is perfect, present, as she is, with God who has placed in her his delight. But, more than ever, the contemplative prayer which raises her above the angels, in the bliss of an eternal Eucharist, carries an irresistible intercession, on her part, that sinners, all of us countless children of hers, may come to be united with her Son.²¹

Not only has Christ, the head of the Church, arisen from the dead and sits in glory at the right hand of the Father, but also the one who is his mother, and by transference of Christ under the Cross, the mother of

²¹ Bouyer, *Seat of Wisdom*, 201–3.

all his followers, has already been assumed, body and soul, into heaven. And for this reason the whole communion of the saints, the whole body of Christ is already anchored in the glory of God, not only in the head, the risen Christ—which is the absolute *conditio sine qua non*—but also already in one, who like the rest of the elect relies completely on the infinite merits of Christ's salvific sacrifice of charity on the Cross.

Third, if the Blessed Virgin Mary was assumed into heaven, soul and body, heaven must be part of creation and must have the extension of at least two human bodies. The resurrection body is a glorified, incorruptible body, but it is still a body and hence has spatial extension, circumscription, and position. Some Lutheran theologians in the Reformation period taught the ubiquity of Christ's body. According to their ontological interpretation of the *communicatio idiomatum*, Christ's body is taken to be omnipresent as Christ's divine nature is omnipresent qua divine substance. Rejecting, in addition, the traditional belief in the assumption of the Mother of God into heaven, body and soul, and assuming simultaneously the "sleep of the soul" allowed them to forego the affirmation of a created heaven. It also meant that there was no ecclesial *inchoatio* of an already obtaining eschatological reality.

Mary's assumption, soul and body, entails on the contrary, the reality of created heaven, of an eschatological presence and not just a promised future that might obtain for God in the eternal *nunc* of the divine midday but not yet for the *ecclesia militans* on earth. Rather, created heaven is a reality already in the world in which the *ecclesia militans* struggles on. Hence the complete remaking of the cosmos, the new heavens and the new earth, has begun with Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven but has continued into the life of the Church in and through the assumption of the Blessed Virgin. The Church exists on earth, in purgatory, and already in heaven, the created heaven—and in the case of the Blessed Mother, soul and body, in the eschatological perfection of glory. The time of the Church is always already fulfilled eschatological time, fulfilled in head and body, fulfilled in Christ and in his mother. Fulfillment does not mean completion and perfection, but a concrete *inchoatio*, the beginning of the completion and of the perfection. The *ecclesia militans* still struggles; there will be failures, betrayals, persecutions in the *ecclesia militans* as there have been, but the *ecclesia triumphans* already is in place in eschatological perfection and comple-

tion in her most eminent member who constantly intercedes for all the other members of the body of Christ on earth and in purgatory.

I have begun this article with a memorable theological statement by Karl Rahner. I shall end it with an equally memorable theological statement from his older brother, Hugo Rahner. It is to be found in his small but important book *Our Lady and the Church*:

Our Lady's Assumption, the final history of the body of the woman who gave birth to God is . . . not so much an exception to the rule, but much more a fulfilling in advance of what is promised to the whole Mystical Body of Christ. And, moreover, it is not only promised, but in a sense already realized. . . . When the Church celebrates the Assumption, she is celebrating her own final glory.²²

Conclusion

What Christ has accomplished for the sake of all humanity, he has already fulfilled comprehensively for his mother, who under the cross has become our mother and through her assumption, body and soul, into heaven has become the eschatological icon of the Church where she reveals to the Church, the mystical body of Christ, the Church's own final end. In Mary, in whom all of faithful Israel is gathered, and who in virtue of her divine maternity is the first of Christ's body, the Church already is anchored in heaven, and heaven is reaching into the *ecclesia militans*. The stunningly beautiful Baroque churches of my home area in Franconia, Germany, embody this vision in the vertical continuity between the *ecclesia militans* at worship in the nave and, as depicted on the walls as various apostles, martyrs, saints, and bishops, and as depicted on the ceiling paintings, the *ecclesia triumphans*, being simultaneously with the *ecclesia militans* at worship, eternally glorifying the Blessed Trinity. The *ecclesia militans* opens up vertically right into heaven and when the faithful look up to the ceiling they see heaven open and closest to the risen Christ they see the Mother of God in heavenly glory. In virtue of the divine faith they have, the faithful understand perfectly well that the

²² Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough, O.P. (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus Press, 2004 [1961]), 123–24, 128.

open heaven depicted on the ceiling is not one of a future to come but of a present that here and now impacts the *ecclesia militans* down below. And so it would be most natural for the faithful to join St. Gabriel and St. Elisabeth in greeting the Holy Mother and simultaneously asking her for her prayer: “Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”

With this prayer we have reached the end of the “what if” thought experiment. It is time to wake up from our dreaming and face again our cold, gray, and drab world in which we might (always haunted by doubt) dare the wager of faith based on a nonthematic existential prompting. Or at least this is what the profoundly secularized simulacrum of faith, the well-camouflaged comprehensive rule of private judgments in matters of revealed religion, would want us to believe. But what if we have no good reason to entertain the preceding reflections as a “what if” thought experiment of a hypothetically supposed divine faith? What if divine faith is indeed the only faith worth having? What if sacred theology is inherently bound to and fed, illumined and guided by divine faith? What if this theology is the only theology worth doing? For after all, as *Spe Salvi* emphasizes, “in embryo there are already present in us the things that are hoped for: a whole, true life.”²³ And having received the very substance of a whole, true life in divine faith, must it not be similar to what Psalm 126 expresses: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream” (Ps 126:1; RSV)? **N&V**

²³ Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe salvi*, §7.