

Father Champagnat and the Assumption

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Chapter X of *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, which sets out the history of the Institute's liturgical traditions, tells us "The five principal feast of the Blessed Virgin, that is to say: the Immaculate Conception, the Purification, the Annunciation, the Assumption and the Nativity have always been holidays and celebrated solemnly since 1824" that is to say, since the Institute set up a chapel in L'Hermitage. [*Translator's Note: The translation of the ALS text was done from the French of the original Paper and is not from any official translation.*] However, only the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were prepared for by a novena, with the singing of the *Ave Maris Stella* and, for the Assumption, litanies of the Sacred Heart of Mary. In 1843, that is, after Father Champagnat, ceremonies during the octave of the feast were added. For the Institute, these two marial feasts are linked: the Immaculate Conception foreshadows the Incarnation and Redemption and the Assumption proclaims the victory of the Risen Christ and his Mother. These feasts, then, are, at one and the same time, christological and marial.

The Assumption is honoured in three stages: firstly, the "dormition" of Mary, then her assumption properly so-called, an extension of Christ's Ascension, finally, her reigning in heaven with her Son. This tradition finds its biblical anchorage in Chapter 12 of the Apocalypse: the pregnant woman crowned with stars, clothed with the sun. The first name of the Mother House - L'Hermitage de Notre Dame - was probably inspired by this same chapter, recalling the Woman who, pursued by the dragon, took refuge in the desert, where God had prepared a place of safety.

In France, the Assumption was also a royal and national feast: in 1638 King Louis XIII consecrated his kingdom to Mary and had her Assumption celebrated on 15th August throughout the kingdom. The custom was so well-established that the Concordat of 1802, which suppressed the majority of holidays of obligation in France, kept 15th August, although the Emperor sought to change its meaning by instituting the feast of Saint Napoleon. After 1815, celebrating the Assumption meant reconnecting with a tradition prior to the Revolution: at one and the same time, religious, national and royal. However, with the Revolution of 1830, the sacred character of royalty disappeared and it is to Mary that the Institute attributes the royal title through the *Salve Regina*, established at L'Hermitage on that occasion.

The Assumption has begotten a rich iconography (Murillo...), even at L'Hermitage. Letterheads from 1833 presented a summary of the spirituality of the Institute: the glory of Mary and Jesus in heaven, the completion of the Assumption at the same time as the recalling of the Immaculate Conception and of the Holy Family. In the new chapel of L'Hermitage, built in 1836, there stood, in the choir, a large picture of the Assumption, gone today, but which perhaps picked up

the letterheads. In any case, the coat of arms on the altar, which can still be seen today, is a clear evocation of Mary become Queen by means of her Assumption. The two branches which surround the interlaced letters A M were inspired by the two flowers which accompany the marial symbol: lilies symbolising the Immaculate Conception and mystical roses, signifying her majesty. These are highly visible in the early seal of the Marist Fathers, instituted prior to 1842. Finally, in 1868, the Institute set up a new official coat of arms in a baroque, fairly arcane style. The crown of stars recalls the Woman of the Apocalypse and the letters are lengthened by swirls reminiscent of the lilies and roses of the early coats of arms.

To sum up, the Marist Brothers' tradition showed little interest in the first two stages of the Assumption in order to contemplate its purpose: Mary, Queen of Heaven beside her Son. On earth, L'Hermitage was intended to be the most perfect copy possible of this heavenly kingdom: a mystical city.

The Assumption Today

The feast of the Assumption finds its place in the diary of the summer heat-wave. Numerous villages celebrate their principal feast-day on 15th August. The religious content is framed by the parameters of a dogma proclaimed by Pope Pius XII on 1st November 1950. Does that really say anything to the believers of today, to us Marist Brothers today?

Beyond historical and mariological considerations, I would like to draw attention to a point which seems to me to be highly relevant. The Assumption of the Virgin Mary body and soul into heaven reaffirms the transcendent meaning of the human body and the unity of the person in all his/her dimensions.

The Pope proclaimed the dogma at the time the horrors of the Second World War were still recent. The war had slaughtered millions of people, killed in the trenches, in the concentration camps, in town themselves as a result of bombing. Experiments had been carried out on human bodies for medical purposes and to analyse tolerance for pain. Hunger, illness and mutilation had transformed bodies into sites of suffering. Rape, sexual abuse and prostitution degraded women through exploitation of their bodies. Certain scenes in "Saving Private Ryan" bluntly show the reality of war in the fragility and pain of people touched by it. In this context, the dogma has a particular reading: the human body has a transcendent value. This goes beyond the platonic interpretation of the body as prisoner of the soul, an interpretation which negatively marked a number of centuries of Christianity in spite of St Paul's conception of it as the temple of the Spirit. The human body merits respect because it possesses dignity and is an indissoluble part of the unity of the individual. Our social life today always needs to reflect on the human body in its proper dimension. Once, from the point of view of a disembodied spirituality, the body was seen

as more of a hindrance, a burden to be rid of as soon as possible. Today, we are evolving towards a consumerist idea and the body is losing its transcendent dimension in order to inscribe itself in purely materialistic parameters. But the forms of exploitation, violence and abuse remain... The body-soul integration underlined by Mary's Assumption which relinquishes neither of the two dimensions refers back to the unity of the person. A person is not a soul which wanders through history in a body, as those who believe in reincarnation accept. For them, the body is only a circumstantial tale. Numerous *New Age* theories give total credence to the transmigration of souls. These approaches may have something to say, but, in the end, they reduce the person to a spirit or energy without any profound material engagement. The dogma reveals numerous aspects of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. At the same time, it speaks to our human situation. It invites us to consider the body as a personal good and to uphold social policies which respect and promote the dignity of the human body. We have a long way to go. Marist pedagogy sees that in its attempt to promote integral education, always seeking new ways of doing things. On the other hand, many people have not solved a badly-phrased dilemma: sacrifice the body to save the soul or sacrifice the soul to save the body.

The Christian faith excludes neither the one nor the other. The spiritual sense of person demands a harmonisation of these two aspects. Each person knows, within his/her own life, the cost of maturing in this unity; each can strive to bring dignity to the lives of others by avoiding using or abusing the human body. The tragedy of hunger, the sexual exploitation of children and women, work in unhealthy and precarious conditions, the proliferation of wars, negligence in the resolution of food- and health-issues, manipulation of the body for publicity, uncontrolled genetic experimentation, the fight against COVID-19, etc...are so many tasks to accomplish without too much delay. The Assumption is not an other-worldly dogma, but a spiritual impulse, a faith-issue for working in this area.