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What are we to assume about the Assumption?

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

The current issue of *Our Sunday Visitor*, that still point at the whirling universe of church publications, reminds its readers that the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is rising like a midsummer moon over the calendar pages. They urge them to celebrate this commemoration of the direct assumption of Mary, body and soul, into Heaven. This really happened, the church is said to teach, as a fulfillment of Mary's remaining both sinless all her life and a virgin after giving birth to the Savior.

You have to hand it to this traditional newspaper whose publishers include a mild theological disclaimer to the effect that we do not know how this event took place. In short, that it is a Mystery. Their note is both a bow to modern thinking and a credit to the editors who understand that their readers want encouragement in their faith rather than complex theological discourses. These Catholics sit neither on the Far Right nor the Far Left, but occupy the middle pews of the contemporary Church.

This feast has warm associations in many Catholic traditions in which it has accented the wonder and mystery, the sacramentality we might say, of midsummer. With an eye on their ripening fields the Irish knew it as Lady's Day in August and Americans, with an eye on their seaside holidays, found spiritual renewal in getting into the water on that day. It is as if such customs recognized that the Mystery of the Feast spoke mysteriously and deeply to believers who were moved by its symbolism rather than its historical character.

While *Our Sunday Visitor's* column reassures Catholics that the early Church Fathers held this miraculous happening as true and that the church has always taught it to the faithful. While "The church has always taught this" is a powerful argument, it begs the question of the mode and manner as well as the meaning of Mary's journey to Heaven.

The Assumption invites us to tap into the vein of rich spiritual ore that runs just beneath the surface of a

teaching that is radically diminished when it is presented literally as if by a reporter breathlessly describing the launch of a space vehicle from Cape Canaveral, "We have lift-off."

Was it an accident of history or a powerfully symbolic underscoring of the relevance of this teaching that Pope Pius XII proclaimed it in 1950 at the very heart of the tumultuous twentieth century? Graham Greene drew on his novelist's sensitivity to symbol in an essay in then newsstand dominant *LIFE* magazine. After two World Wars and the Holocaust, among other horrors of the first half of the century, the pope was responding to the world wide need for a reaffirmation of the dignity of the human body and the sacredness of human personality. Greene understood that the real meaning of the Assumption was found not in tightly bound literalism but in the overflow of a Mystery that, as a mother would have it, concerned us as much as her.

While some Protestants pulled back from the declaration as hardly conducive to ecumenical relations, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung considered it the most important religious declaration of the twentieth century. As a master of the mythological river that nourished what he termed our "collective unconscious," Jung grasped the profound and fitting symbolism of such a declaration at mid-century.

The world had already turned its attention toward the endless vistas and wonder of space and astronauts would leave boot marks on the moon's surface a generation later. The Swiss scholar sensed that the Assumption symbolized the mystery of human destiny and the end of the pre-Copernican era at the same time. The Assumption was a mythological and therefore a spiritual symbol of a Mystery in which we are still caught up. There was another numinous layer beyond the celebration of Mary and the confirmation of human dignity.

The Assumption proclaimed the Mystery of the century, the return of Mother Earth to the Heavens and the end, therefore, of the split between Earth and Heaven and all the divisions, such as between flesh and spirit, that flowed from that. It heralded the unity of the universe and the unity of human personality. That is the richest and perhaps least plumbed aspect of this feast. The wonder is that the Assumption is rich and deep enough a Mystery to accommodate these various levels of understanding all at the same time. Midsummer allows us to savor its Mystery in many ways and to understand how much we lose when we limit our religious understanding only to the concrete literal level.

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