

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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When the Risen Lord ascended, the disciples looked up into heaven as their Lord and Master disappeared from sight. Contemplating this scene from Scripture, we may be tempted think that, once the Lord finished his work on earth, he left us behind, disentangling himself from this vale of tears until he should return in glory.

Celebrating today's solemn feast, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we may find ourselves harboring a similar temptation. We may imagine that, in being raised to the heights of heaven, Mary has left the playing field of history and has escaped the world that pierced her immaculate heart with the sword of sorrow.

Let us harbor no such thoughts on this joyful feast.

When the Exalted Lord disappeared from human sight, through the power and working of the Holy Spirit, he became even more powerfully present to the newborn Church. Even though the disciples could no longer see or touch Jesus, or eat with him or listen to the sound of his voice, they were closer to him than ever. Thanks to gift of the Holy Spirit, they could proclaim his Gospel from the rooftops, with conviction and power, even at the cost of their lives So too, as Mary is lifted up to heaven from the desert of our earthly existence, let us not imagine that we are deprived of her presence or her prayers. Because she shares fully in her Divine Son's victory over sin and death, Mary is closer to us than ever, uniting herself to us in the celebration of Holy Mass, listening like a loving Mother to our pleas, and interceding for us before God's throne.

Our Virgin Mother wants nothing more than that we, her spiritual children, share fully in the Risen Lord's victory over the forces of sin and death still at work in the world.

The Woman Clothed with the Son

Even so, doesn't it sometimes seem as if that victory over sin is out of our reach? When we think of our sins and sinful inclinations, don't we sometimes wonder if ever we will attain that purity of heart so necessary if we would see God? (Cf. Mt. 5:8) When we see the Church is buffeted on every side by scandal and persecution, do we not ask whether the triumph of love proclaimed at Mass will ever be ours? How can we share in Jesus' triumph as long as we are plagued by weakness?

How can it be said that the Church shares in the Lord's victory when she is the object of scorn, from within and without?

In search of answers, let us turn to the woman clothed with the sun whose image shines forth in our reading from the Book of Revelation.

This woman stands both for the Church and also for Mary, the Mother of the Church. The sun with which she is clothed is the glory of God's self-giving love: the glory revealed on the face of Christ as he stood transfigured on Mount Tabor, the glory that shone forth from the Cross and from the wounds of Christ whose death destroyed our death and whose rising restored our life.

More perfectly than any other human being, Mary reflects this glory. This is the sun with which she is clothed: the glory of the Sun of Justice.

Nonetheless, she is under siege by a dragon who seeks her demise and that of her Divine Son, and by extension, all of us, who are her spiritual offspring. In the Book of Revelation, the dragon stands for the forces of evil – for Satan, for our concupiscence, and for that worldly power opposed to God's reign.

At first glance, the woman appears to be no match the dragon's ferocity just as the Church appears powerless in the face of the world's violence and hatred. Yet the woman, the woman is stronger because God is stronger. In the end it is not power and hatred that triumph but love, God's love, and that peace which the world cannot

give but only the Risen Lord.

But in the meantime, both the woman and her Son remain vulnerable to those forces. So too, neither the Church nor her members are spared trials and suffering. The Church's long history bears this out. So does the life of any serious Christian.

Mary Shows the Way

But let us take heart: Even as the Blessed Mother goes up to heaven, so too she visits us, as once she visited her cousin, Elizabeth. From her exalted place in heaven she journeys to the threshold of our hearts to teach us the way of love and to help us follow her to the courts of heaven.

Under Mary's loving gaze, isn't it the case that our sharing in the Lord's triumph of love somehow seems doable – doable for each of us in our journey of priesthood and priestly formation – doable for the Church whom we love and passionately wish to serve. What does Mary teach us about sharing in her Divine Son's triumph? Among the many things she might say to us, let me mention three.

First is faith and trust in God and in his promises. In today's Gospel, Elizabeth calls Mary blessed because she believed "that what was spoken to [her] by the Lord would be fulfilled." . . . And not only Elizabeth, but every generation would call Mary blessed precisely because she believed and trusted in God's promises.

If we examine the quality of Mary's faith, we see in it nothing casual or half-hearted. Rather, faith in God gave her life its whole direction, its meaning, and its destiny. Faith is that theological virtue, that gift of the Spirit which opens the door to the great and mighty deeds which God wishes to accomplish in us and in the Church.

Do we have a faith like unto Mary's? Do we believe with every fiber of our being? Does our faith give our lives their direction, meaning, and destiny? Only when we are armed with a faith like Mary's can we withstand anything and everything the dragon throws at us and at our beloved Church.

Second, Mary shows us that the triumph over sin and death can be ours if only we would engage in heartfelt prayer and steady contemplation of God's Word.

St. Augustine says of Mary that ‘before she conceived the Lord in her body, she had already conceived him in her soul.’ In other words, by absorbing God’s Word in prayer, Mary made room for Jesus both in her heart and in her womb. Thus she became the Ark of the Covenant, a living tabernacle, for God’s Son. While only Mary was destined to be the Mother of God, we too can make room for Christ in our hearts by prayer and contemplation, and like Mary we can weave our prayer together from the golden threads of Scripture.

Third, the humble and sinless Virgin Mary also teaches us the way of God’s mercy: “His mercy,” she says, “is from age to age for those who fear him” – that is to say, for those who do not take the Lord for granted or presume his mercies.

Mary, the Mother of Mercy, teaches us that love triumphs over sin and death when, in the power of the Spirit, we experience remorse for our sins, when we allow the Lord to overturn our worldly values and upend our petty concerns, and place ourselves humbly before God’s throne in the Sacrament of Mercy. In that Sacrament we experience in a very deep and personal way the Savior’s love, the only love that is ‘stronger than sin and more powerful than death.’

Yes, Mary teaches us the way of faith, prayer, and repentance as the path to victory. And more than that, Mary intercedes for us, powerfully, as the first of all the saints, as the source of so many graces for each of us and for the Church in difficult times.

On this feast of the Assumption we acknowledge that Mary is closer to us than ever, if only we would welcome her, if only we would give her permission to help us to entrust our lives to God the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Mary, assumed into heaven, Mary, the Queen of Peace pray for us!