

Heaven is God, not an imaginary place, Pope Benedict says

CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy – Heaven is not an abstract idea or an imaginary place, but heaven is God, Pope Benedict XVI said.

Celebrating an early morning Mass Aug. 15, the pope said the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary “urges us to raise our gaze toward heaven, not a heaven of abstract ideas nor an imaginary heaven created in art, but the true reality of heaven which is God himself. God is heaven.”

During the Mass in the small parish Church of St. Thomas, located on the main square in Castel Gandolfo, the pope said that while Mary’s assumption is “totally unique and extraordinary,” it also assures believers that their destiny, like hers, is to be with God forever.

God is “our goal, he is the dwelling place from which we came and toward which we are called,” the pope told about 200 people who had crowded into the church, while hundreds of others watched on a large screen erected in the square.

“We are all children of God the father, brothers and sisters of Jesus, children of our mother Mary,” the pope said. “And all of us want happiness, and that happiness is found in God.”

Pope Benedict said Mary, as the loving mother of her son’s followers, “helps us, encourages us so that every moment of our existence would be a step in this journey toward God.”

“Gazing at Mary, assumed into heaven, we understand better that our everyday lives – although marked by problems and difficulties – flow like a river toward the divine ocean, toward the fullness of joy and peace,” he said.

The pope said that in a world marked by “the sad spectacle of so much false joy and, at the same time, so much agonizing pain,” Christians must learn to be like Mary, “signs of hope and consolation.”

At midday, Pope Benedict recited the Angelus with visitors gathered in the courtyard of the papal summer villa.

He said that while the last mention of Mary in the Bible places her with the apostles awaiting the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the church teaches that she was taken, body and soul, “from the earth to heaven.”

“This firm conviction of the church found its coronation in the dogmatic definition of the Assumption pronounced by my venerable predecessor Pius XII in the year 1950,” he said.

“From paradise, the Blessed Mother continues always, especially in difficult hours of trial, to watch over her children, whom Jesus himself entrusted to her before dying on the cross,” the pope said.

Pope Benedict said the hundreds of Marian shrines around the world testify to the fact that millions of Christians have and continue to experience her maternal love.

The pope specifically mentioned the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, which he will visit during a Sept. 12-15 trip to France.

“Mary assumed into heaven indicates to us the ultimate aim of our earthly pilgrimage,” he said.

“She reminds us that our whole being – spirit, soul and body – is destined for the fullness of life, that one who lives and dies in love for God and for one’s neighbor will be transfigured into the image of the glorious body of the risen Lord, that the Lord casts down the mighty and raises up the humble,” the pope said.