

Tony Lusvardi, SJ  
Assumption  
Rv 11:19A; 12:1-6A  
1 Cor 15:20-27  
Lk 1:39-56

On Sunday I promised to explain the difference between the Assumption and the Ascension during today's homily. I hope the two days of suspense haven't been too much.

The two holy days are easy to confuse, not just because both three-syllable words start with the letter A and end with -ion. Both feasts also celebrate someone rising up body and soul into heaven; in the case of the Ascension, which happened 40 days after Easter, it is Jesus who ascends; today it is Mary who is assumed. The English major in me can't resist a small grammar lesson, pointing out that in the first case the verb is active, in the second it is passive. In other words, Jesus ascends—he is the one doing the action—but in the second case, the action is done to Mary—Mary is assumed by God. This is, of course, because in both cases we are dealing with an action only God can do. Jesus, who is fully human and fully divine, ascends on his own divine power, but Mary, who is the greatest saint but not divine, is taken up body and soul into heaven by her creator and redeemer.

Grammar lesson aside, you might be thinking: OK, different person, but the same idea, right? If so, the answer will surprise you because these two events teach us very different things.

To simplify a bit, Jesus' Ascension into heaven tells us what to do in this life; Mary's Assumption teaches us about what will happen in the life to come.

Jesus' Ascension marks the beginning of the Church in time, and Mary's Assumption points us to the end of time. This may seem a little counter-intuitive, but consider that the first reading for Jesus' Ascension comes from Acts of the Apostles; today's first reading is from the Book of Revelation. When Jesus ascends into heaven, he gives the apostles instructions as to how they are to lead the Church on earth. In Matthew's Gospel he says: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." He gives them a bit of sacramental and moral instruction. And then he adds something important: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." In other words, Jesus' Ascension is not about him leaving but about him remaining present and active in and through the Church, in her sacraments and teachings. In the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the Ascension ends with two angels appearing to the apostles and saying, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?" In other words, "Don't just stand there—get to work."

The Assumption of Mary, on the other hand, gives us hope for the reward in store for those who do cooperate with God's work on earth. The reason the dogma we celebrate today is so central to our faith is because it expresses not just our joy

that the Almighty has done great things for Mary but that he has promised to raise up all his adopted children, body and soul, on the last day. The result of living in union with Christ in this life—of dying with him in baptism and observing what he commands us—is to continue to live with him in the next life. Mary offers us an example of perfect cooperation with the Lord; her words to the angel Gabriel say it all: “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” From that moment on, Mary, who was conceived without sin as a preparation for her singular mission, becomes a perfect model of the Church because our mission is also to cooperate in God’s saving work. Mary does this perfectly, so when her earthly life came to an end there was no delay in her ultimate glorification. She entered into heavenly glory body and soul. Our Christian hope is that at the end of time we will rise, body and soul, into glory. For those of us who do not manage to cooperate with God’s will as perfectly as Mary, we hold out the further hope of purgatory; that after death, our imperfections will be burned away like gold made pure in fire. Mary never had to undergo such cleansing, so on today’s feast we can look to her as the star in the night sky that helps us navigate toward our final destination. She has already arrived and so can truly be “our life, our sweetness, and our hope.”