

"The Feast of the Assumption"

Homily of August 15, 2003

by Fr. Brian Joyce

I was reading a book about the Church in the United States, and it has a kind of depressing subtitle called, "A People Adrift," describing the Catholic Church in the United States. In its chapter on "coming together to worship," it questions whether we really stop to find out what we are doing. For example, the writer says, "I visited church after church across the country and, in some places, everybody sings and, in other places, nobody does. It is very depressing. If this were a business organization, we would have done an evaluation and found out what is really happening, and done something about it."

He makes some simple suggestions, what to do about it. He says, in every parish, at least once every twenty years, we should have somebody stand up here on each side and during the opening song, look out and count how many mouths are open and how many are not open at all. Now, I know a parish that tried that, and it didn't help because a lot of people were yawning and they got counted as singers.

So, he had a second suggestion, that, if that didn't work, don't have any accompaniment. And you have singing acappella, without accompaniment, and you can tell whether the people can hear themselves. They are not listening to an organ, a piano. We can hear one another. You did very well this evening. That's why I want to mention that. You did very well. So, we had kind of a test, kind of an experiment, kind of an evaluation of what's been going on. You passed the test.

Today's feast of the Assumption, in a way, was kind of a test in the Church. In 1870 (So, that's one hundred thirty years ago.) for the first time, the Church in a Council, after a lot of debate, said that the Church believes in Papal Infallibility, that, if he chose to and is in union with the Church, the Pope could, in the name of the whole Church, but just by himself, get up and say, "This is part of the official dogma," teaching infallibly in the Church.

Now, that happened one hundred thirty years ago. When were we going to try it? Should we ever try it out? Has it ever been tried out?..... Once, in 1950, the dogma of the Assumption. And what the pope did, Pope Pius XII, he questioned every bishop and university and theologate in the world. And he asked two questions. Is this what we truly believe as a people? And is there good reason for proclaiming it as a teaching of the Church now, as official, as dogma, as infallible? Ninety-eight percent of the responses came back, "Yes!" And the question that was tricky was not "Do we believe in the Assumption of Mary?" because we already had it as a mystery of the rosary. We already had the feast day. We already, for centuries, had celebrated that somehow Mary was present with Jesus after her death, fully, in her full person. ("Body and soul" was the language they used.) And there was no question about that, no question about our honoring Mary. But, was there reason for announcing it now?

The response that came back, Pope Pius XII wrote out, when he announced in 1950 that it is official belief of the Catholic people that Mary was assumed into heaven. The reason, he wrote out, was, "We have lived in a century of two World Wars, of genocide, of holocaust, of treating one another and our bodies and human beings terribly. And somehow we have to be reminded that we are each and every one, tremendously precious. And the way he chose to do it was saying, "Look at our sister Mary, our mother Mary, a human being like us, lifted to the presence of God. Look how precious life is! Look how precious Mary is! And look how precious we are; and look how precious the people of every land in this world are!

And, that is what we celebrate tonight, how precious Mary is to God. But the consequence is, and so are we! If our sister, our mother Mary is so honored, a mere human being, we mere human beings carry something very precious and should treat each other like that. At least, that is what the Pope said and intended, as he reminded us to celebrate this feast.

Let us give thanks to the Lord Who is so good!