

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – THURSDAY, 15TH AUGUST

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Good morning. Today, Catholics around the world celebrate the Feast of the Assumption – the belief that, at the end of her earthly life, the Virgin Mary was bodily raised into heaven. Christians celebrated the Assumption in the early Church, but it was proclaimed an official teaching of the Catholic Church by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

In many Catholic countries this is a public holiday, with extravagant festivities in honour of the Virgin. Britain has a rather dreary Christian culture by comparison. Here, Christianity tends to be associated with moral rules and endless squabbles about sex. This is a far cry from medieval times when Britain was home to a flourishing tradition of Marian devotion with feasts, pilgrimages, shrines and churches dedicated to Mary.

To see doctrines such as the Assumption as historical facts or matters for scientific speculation is to misunderstand their function in the Christian life. They are mysteries – doorways into contemplation intended to deepen a believer's relationship with God. At their best, such doctrines are imaginative expressions of hope common to many religions. Beyond our mortal lives are realms of wonder, joy and peace that we can only yearn for in this world with all its sufferings, injustices, and violence.

That's why Mary's Assumption has to be understood in the context of a life that experienced the heights and depths of joy and sorrow. Mary participated in all aspects of Christ's life, from pregnancy and childbirth to her faithful presence at the foot of the cross. There, she experienced the ultimate anguish of a mother who keeps watch as her child dies in agonies of physical and spiritual distress. Only a mother who has been there can know what that means. Among her many titles, Mary is known as the Mater Dolorosa or the Mother of Sorrows. The glory of her Assumption is God's promise that there is hope beyond the worst the world can do to us. Without that promise, the crucifixion becomes the ultimate tragedy of futility and failure.

Many women theologians are reclaiming Mary as a symbol of the dignity, authority and grace of women created by God and called to lives of courageous wisdom and revolutionary hope. In Luke's Gospel, Mary's Magnificat praises God who has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away. That, for me, is indeed cause for hope and celebration.