

### **AN UNCORRUPTED BODY**

(Our experience often tells us one thing, our faith another.  
We must then decide which we will follow.)

Many of you may be old enough to remember Pope John XXIII. He was 78 years old when he was elected pope and the thinking was that he would be an interim pope, a kind of caretaker pope until another and younger pope would be elected. How wrong the conventional thinking was. His given name was Angelo Roncalli and he was a large man with big ears and a big nose. He looked as if he were of peasant stock and he was. And he was proud of that fact. He had spent most of his life in the Vatican Diplomatic Corps and then was made the cardinal patriarch of Venice. From there he was elected Pope in 1958. He surprised everyone by calling the first pastoral Council in the history of the Catholic Church. The Council was called Second Vatican Council and began in 1961, ending in 1965. He was not alive at the end. He died in 1963. His successor was Pope Paul VI and he finished the work of the Council.

I go into all of this because a few years ago, the cause of his canonization was introduced. Part of the process involves the exhumation of the deceased person's body. They seek to harvest a leg bone that they may use to make relics for distribution all over the world. When they opened John's casket they found a great surprise. His body was incorrupt. Almost forty years after his death, his body had not undergone the corruption that every body undergoes. Bodies die and they disintegrate. That is our common experience. But there is more going on in this life than we know.

While we are not sure about what happened or is still happening in the case of Pope John XXIII, there is still a grave. There is still a body in the grave, although an incorrupt body. Not so with Mary of Nazareth. Was there a grave for her? There is one so marked in Jerusalem. Did she die? That is what the early church believed. Was she taken up into heaven at the end point of her life on earth? We don't know what happened to her body specifically but my personal belief is that we all die and so Mary did too. But there is no body in her grave. If you go to the city of Jerusalem today you can go to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Inside that very large church is the site for Calvary and the site of the grave in which Jesus was buried. That grave is still empty, a sign of his resurrection. What has happened to Christ is that he has been transformed, including his body, now glorified. God is able to do things that defy what we understand as the laws of nature.

Over in the Holy Land, north of the walls of that same city of Jerusalem is called the Church of the Dormition. Dormio, in Latin, means I sleep. Dormition means that the person has fallen asleep in the Lord. That is one of the ways that early Christians referred to the dying of other Christians. They fell asleep in the Lord. From early centuries, Mary's Dormition or her Assumption was believed and celebrated. What the early Christians believed was that Mary was given a share in the victory that her Son had won, over death and over the grave. In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared Mary's Assumption to be an infallible belief and dogma of the Catholic Church. Why? Because of the two horrendous wars that Europe had undergone where millions and millions of people were killed, brutalized and tortured. The whole world seemed starved for hope. The Church's answer was to turn to Mary because it was she who had opened the doors for the coming of Christ and it was Christ who restored hope to this fallen world.

Mary was faithful to the end. She fulfilled her role. And it is our faith conviction that she now shares in the resurrection of Christ. Despite the hatred, despite the violence, despite the dehumanizing forces of evil, goodness triumphs. Love is victorious. Mary's fidelity opens her to the fullness of life. It is the same for us too.

Ask yourself this question. Is hope an issue for you? Is hopelessness an issue especially in these trying times? Then Mary is the one who can restore that virtue to your soul. Why not turn to her? Why not trust her? Why not pray to her? She has been taken up to where Jesus lives (which is what we believe), and she will intercede for you before the Lord. When she attended that wedding at Cana in Galilee and they ran out of wine, she brought the matter to the attention of her Son and then set the stage for him to act. He did and the first of his miracles was then performed. What Mary did for those in need in that moment, she will do for us in ours. There is a whole lot more needed today than to replenish the wine supply. Pray to her for hope. Celebrate her name, her life.