A New Dogma.

The topic assigned me read: The Assumption of Our Lady, A New Dogma. Since that title is not quite free of ambiguity, it was explained to me that very good people were perplexed over the definition of a doctrine which apparently is not contained either in Scripture or in Tradition. My purpose, then, is not to pronounce a panegyric celebrating the recent definition but to deal with a problem, -- in fact, to deal with the same problem that I happened to treat in the theological congress held in the University of Montreal two years ago.

As I pointed out on that occasion, it is important to distinguish between the doctrine that is defined by the Church and, on the other hand, the reasons why it is defined. It is a matter of faith that all shall rise from the dead on the Last Day. It is a matter of faith that our Lord rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. Similarly, it is a matter of faith that the body of our Lady, the Mother of our Lord and God, never knew corruption but, as did that of her Son, enjoyed an anticipation of the resurrection. By the dogma of the Assumption is meant precisely that incorruption and anticipated resurrection from the dead. Unmistakably, it is a dogma of faith, for it has been defined by His Holiness, Pope Pius XII; and as it was taught by the universal Church prior to the definition, so now it stands beyond the possibility of doubt.

Still it is one thing to be a Catholic, and something more to be an enlightened Catholic. It is one thing to believe, as God requires us to believe, and it is another thing to know the reasons and explanations that are to be given for our belief. To believe is a matter of salvation; to explain belief is a matter of Catholic culture. It is this secondary but not unimportant aspect of the Assumption that I have to treat. One can manage to live without having a radio set, but it is better to have one. Similarly, one can believe what the Pope has defined without knowing the reasons for it, but it is better to know some thing about the reasons.

First of all, then, a dogma of faith must be contained in Scripture or in an Apostolic Tradition. For what is believed by faith is believed on the authority of God; and what is believed on the authority of God, must have been revealed by God. Moreover, not any divine revelation is to the point; it must be the public revelation of the given to the Apostles. The Church cannot base a dogma upon a private revelation made to a particular saint, for example, to a Saint Margaret Mary or to a Saint Bernadette Soubirous, for the Church was founded to keep and to proclaim the deposit of faith entrusted to her through the Apostles. For this reason any dogma of faith must be contained either in Scripture or in an Apostolic Tradition. For the same reason it is not to the point to account for the dogma of the Assumption in any other manner. When some one

points out to the Most Reverend Archbishop of Canterbury that his own Cathedral contains a monument to the Assumption, he may embarrass the Archbishop but he does not give the Pope a sufficient reason. When it is urged that the feast of the Assumption has been preceded by a fast-day for over eleven hundred years, one adduces an imposing historical fact but not an entire entirely sufficient reason.

In the second place, however, one has to be clear about the meaning of the affirmation, dogmas of faith must be contained in Scripture or in Tradition. There is an important distinction between the explicit and the implicit, and to grasp it is fundamental in the present instance. What then is the distinction? It is explicitly stated in the Gospel of St. Matthew that "thou art Peter, and it is upon this rock that I will build my church; and the gates of hell will not prevail against it; and I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." That is explicit. Again, it is explicitly stated in the same gospel that a wise man builds his house on a rock that resists rain and flood and wind, and that a fool builds his house on sand. While both these statements are explicit, still here it is only implicit that Christ our Lord was a wise man and so built his Church on the rock, Peter. While it is explicit that Peter is the rock, still it is only implicit that Peter is to have successors, that after Peter's death the Church is

not to be moved from its rock foundation and foolishly be rebuilt upon sand. To know that Peter is the rock, one has only to read; to know that the church is never to be rebuilt upon a foundation of sand, one must not merely read but also understand. What is read, is explicit; what is understood, is implicit.

Let me give another illustration of this difference. In the twenty-fourth chapter of St. Luke there is the account of the two disciples who had their faith shaken by the passion and the death of our Lord, did not credit the report of his resurrection, and on the first Easter Sunday set out for a town named Emmaus some sixty furlongs from Jerusalem. On their way, as you know, a stranger joined them, upraided upbraided them for being foolish and slow of heart, and explained to them the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. As he spoke, their faith was enkindled afresh, their hearts burned within them, the eyes of their understanding were opened. They began to see in divine revelation what had been there all along, though previously they had not seen it. What had been said by Moses and the prophets they knew quite well; but what they knew was more a matter of reading or hearing than of understanding. They had grasped what was on the surface; they were familiar with the words; but what they had been unable to do was to begin from Moses and go through all the prophets picking out and explaining each of the passages that referred to the redemptive death of the Messias.

Now in the long history of the Church this distinction between the explicit and the implicit constantly recurs. For Catholics accept the word of God, but they accept not only the word but also its meaning. They receive divine revelation not only with their ears but also with their understanding. On the other hand, the history of heresy is largely a matter of attending to words and neglecting meaning, of being familiar with the words, as were the disciples of Emmaus, but of being unwilling to listen to explanations such as our Lord's appeal to Moses and all the prophets. The council of Nicea in the year 325 defined that God the Son is one in substance with God the Father; the Arians, despite their many differences among themselves, were agreed on one thing, that the consubstantiality of the Son was not in Scripture, and of course it is not explicitly in Scripture. When the council of Ephesus in the year 431 defined that our Lady was the Mother of God, the Nestorians objected that that was not in Scripture, and explicitly it is not. When the council of Chalcedon in the year ~~s~~ 451 defined that our Lord was one Person with two natures, the Monophysites objected that Scipture does not talk about persons or natures and explicitly Scripture does not. When the orthodox East broke with the West over the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son, it was on the ground that Scripture said nothing about that procession, and explicitly it does not. When in the sixteenth century Luther and Calvin left the Church, it was to return, they claimed, to the purity of the gospel, ~~the~~ to the revelation made by God himself. What that revelation was they did not agree.

But on one thing they did agree, namely, that the Catholic Church had proposed a number of dogmas not explicitly in Scripture. Now the Assumption of our Lady has been defined, and people are perplexed over this new dogma which is not explicitly in Scripture. But if it is a new dogma, also it is just another new dogma. The Pope has done again, what the Catholic Church has been doing all along.

But it will be asked, Is not this business of understanding the meaning of revelation rather risky? What one good and holy man of woman understands one way, is understood in another way by someone just as good and just as holy. Would it not be far safer to be content with the words and pay no attention to the meaning? While this is an obvious difficulty, still that is not the solution. If one paid no attention to the meaning of revelation, one would pay no attention to revelation at all; one would take the precious talent, wrap it in a napkin, bury it in the ground, and live one's life as though God had never revealed anything at all. One has to attend to the meaning. Still one does not have to attend to the meaning discovered by private inspiration or upheld by private judgment. Catholics believe in divine revelation. They believe not merely with their ears but also with their minds. But they reject today, as they rejected in the sixteenth century, the strange notion that ~~divine~~ a public revelation is to be interpreted by private judgment. Our Lord founded his Church for all mankind, for Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian, slaves and freemen, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, intelligent and dull. One does not have to be a scholar to get to heaven; and even if

one is a very intelligent and very learned scholar, still one has to believe just as anyone else. ~~He~~ God confided his revelation not to the experts but to the Church. It was not to the scholars but to a backward group of Galileans that our Lord said: "He that listens to you, listens to me; and he that despises you, despises me." (Luke 10, 16).

I think I have been laboring upon a point that you all know very well. Revelation is not merely a matter of words but also of meaning, not merely of superficial meaning but also of profound meaning. God expects us to accept his whole message, and he has given us an infallible Church to teach us as Our Lord taught his apostles and disciples.

But before applying these principles to the dogma of the Assumption, it will be well to meet a difficulty. Probably you have heard it said that Catholic thought upon the Assumption of our Lady has no basis but a mass of legendary writings, named apocrypha, that made their appearance in the course of the fifth and sixth centuries. Now, what are the facts? I offer two. The first Roman pronouncement upon the Assumption occurs in a document that probably belongs to the pontificate of Pope Gelasius I from the year 492 to the year 496. What was this pronouncement? It condemned as untrustworthy and unacceptable an account of our Lady's Assumption. My first fact is a document of the fifth century. My second fact is the announcement of the Feast of the Assumption as read in Roman Martyrology for a number of centuries. It runs as follows:

"The Falling Asleep of Mary the Holy Mother of God. Though her most sacred body is not to be found on earth, still holy mother Church celebrates her venerable memory with no doubt

that she has left this life. But as to where that venerable temple of the Holy Ghost has been hidden by divine providence, the sobriety of the Church prefers pious ignorance to any frivolous or apocryphal doctrine." [Jugie, p 208, 361, 428] Such was the extremely cautious announcement read annually in the Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome until the reform of the Martyrology by Baronius in 1584 about eleven centuries after the decree of Pope Gelasius. I think you can see for ~~yourselves~~ yourselves that critics of Catholic doctrine, in this matter as in others, seem to have little care to be accurate even in mere matters of fact.

What, then, are the grounds for the definition of the Assumption? As you will expect, it is contained in Scripture but not explicitly; it is contained there implicitly; and the way to grasp that implication is the way our Lord showed that the doctrine of his redemptive death was contained in the Old Testament. I can only sketch the argument. Divine revelation gives us a general scheme of things. Death is a natural process awaiting us all; still it is not merely natural but also a curse upon the descendants of Adam. Death is because of sin. For it was after Adam's sin that God said: "Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return." Next, as death is the wages of sin, so resurrection is the fruit of the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To the risen Christ St. Peter in the Acts of the Apostles (2, 31) applied the words of the fifteenth psalm "that he was not left in the place of death, and that his body did not see corruption." Such is the general scheme that is revealed explicitly. Let us now turn to our Lady. It is

plain that in this general scheme she holds a place of privilege. From Adam all men contracted original sin, and for that reason infants are baptized. But our Lady was to be the Mother of God, and so she had the privilege of the Immaculate Conception. Again, the curse of Eve was not upon her, for she was blessed among women, a mother yet a virgin before parturition and in it and after it. But if our Lady was free from original sin, which is the ground of death and corruption, if throughout her life she was in the grace of God, and grace is the ground of resurrection, if she was freed from the curse of Eve and the pangs of motherhood and so blessed among women that the fruits of grace were revealed not only in her soul but also in her body, then how could she be subject to the curse, Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return? It would not make sense. If our Lady is full of grace, as the angel said at the Incarnation and we say in the Hail Mary, then hers is not the lesser grace of resurrection on the last day with the rest of us sinners, but the fuller grace of an anticipated resurrection with her divine Son. Scripture bids us: Honor thy father and thy mother. Our Lord had no human father but he did have a mother; as he died, so she died. Yet while he has the Church honor the tombs and venerate the relics of his saints, still he permits the Church to know nothing of the tomb or the relics of our Lady.

Now you see how such argument admits endless development. But the important point, to which I must turn immediately, is its value. Does it establish only the incorruption of our Lady's body, or does it prove as well her anticipated resurrection? Does it yield only probability, or does it yield certainty?

Is the conclusion merely something connected with the deposit of faith, or does it form part of the deposit itself? As you see, these are the basic questions; each has to be answered; and when such answers are combined, there is a rather notable variety of possible results. Upon these issues the Church has been meditating for some fourteen hundred years. Very slowly, century by century, has one point been cleared up and then another. This development can be traced in the liturgies of the East and of the West, in the sermons that have been preached and recorded, and in the works of theologians. Let us confine ourselves to the theologians of the West. From the seventh to the ninth centuries there are two schools of thought; on the one hand, there are those opposed to the doctrine because of the suspicions engendered by apocryphal writings; they form the larger group, but there is also a smaller group that argue the matter on its own merits and favor the Assumption. From the ninth century to the middle of the thirteenth there are the same two schools of opinion, but there also is a third group, containing such illustrious names as St. Anselm of Canterbury and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and they write magnificent panegyrics for the feast of the Assumption without committing themselves upon its precise significance. In the course of the thirteenth century, when theology had worked out its method with some assurance, the situation changes. There still are those afraid of apocryphal origins; on the other hand, those that favor the Assumption fall into three groups; some consider it a pious belief, others consider it certain doctrine, others argue that it is of faith or almost of faith. From the thirteenth century

to the sixteenth the fully affirmative answer steadily gains ground. With the literary criticism of the Renaissance it was settled that a letter, purporting to be of St. Jerome, was in fact a forgery; this letter had been the principal objection against the theologians favoring the Assumption; with its removal from theological consideration the way was made straight and plane. What opponents had not dared to deny at any time, then was removed from the suspicion of doubt.

But the Church does not hurry. During the past four hundred years there have been disputes upon the issue, but minimum positions have approximated ever more closely to the maximum. Within the past eighty years it has become apparent that the ordinary teaching power of the church, exercised by the archbishops and bishops throughout the world, was committed to the affirmation of the Assumption as a matter of faith. This, of course, is far more significant that the thought of theologians, for the Church cannot err in such matters. To be quite certain of the fact, His Holiness, Pope Pius XII, wrote to all the archbishops and bishops. In accord with their replies he decided to define the doctrine, lest what pertains to the deposit of faith should not be preached clearly and unequivocally to all men.

May the Immaculate Heart of Mary, alive in her living body in heaven, take compassion on all her children in this world, and obtain for them the grace of inward peace with God and outward peace with their neighbor.

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