

THE DEPTH AND BREADTH OF MARY'S "FULLNESS OF GRACE"

(On the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, 15.08.21 by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

In the Gospel of St. Luke 1:26-38, we read that an Angel named Gabriel, in Hebrew, "Gabr'el", meaning "my strength is God" was sent by God to a virgin in Nazareth, named, Mary to announce to her the singular privilege and mission of becoming the mother of a child whom she was to name Jesus and who will also be called Son of the Most-High or son of God. Before delivering his message, the angel greeted Mary and referred to her as "favoured one" or "full of grace", in Greek, "kecharitōmênē" (see vv. 28.30).

The Church over the ages has kept meditating, like Mary herself did, over the full implications of this angelic greeting and has come to the understanding that this implies that Mary is destined to enjoy a privileged relationship with God right from the moment of her conception, through her existence and even in death.

The first of Mary's privileges as God's "favoured one" is summarized under the teaching of her "immaculate conception", which is the teaching that Mary, being full of grace, and in view of her mission to be mother of the Son of the Most-High, was preserved from the effects of the fall of man, narrated in Genesis 3 as the sin of Adam and Eve, which came to be referred to as "original sin" since the 4th century Christian era. Despite its ancient roots, this teaching came to be officially promulgated only in 1854 by Pope Pius IX with a document titled, "*Ineffabilis Deus*", meaning "Ineffable or inexpressible God", and is celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church on 8 December.

The last of Mary's privileges on earth as "full of grace" or God's "favoured one", is summarized in the teaching that "The Immaculate Mother of God, the ever-virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul, into heavenly glory." This equally ancient teaching came to be officially proclaimed only on 1st November 1950 under the title of "The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary", by Pope Pius XII, with the document, "*Munificentissimus Deus*", meaning "The Most Bountiful God", celebrated as a Solemnity in the Roman Catholic Church August 15.

This is what we celebrate today. The Assumption constitutes, therefore, a culmination of the Church's meditation and understanding of the depth and breadth, or the far-reaching implications of the angel's greeting, addressing Mary as "full of grace" or the "favoured one" of God. Mary, because she was full of grace, was spared the consequences of humanity's fall both at birth and in death, hence, she was conceived without original sin (Immaculate Conception) and did not experience corruption at death but was taken up body and soul into heaven (Glorious Assumption).

In the 1st Reading (Rev 11:19; 12:1-6.10), we read of the vision of a special woman described as clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars, and although both the woman and the child she was to give birth to were threatened by a monstrous being described as a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads, with a tail sweeping a third of the stars of heaven, the woman and her child are described as having been preserved from the fury of the dragon. The child

was caught up to God and to his throne while the mother fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God.

The child in this vision has been understood as a reference to Jesus; consequently, the mother has been understood as a reference to Mary, both of whom, although lived under the constant threat of sin and its consequences, they never for once compromised and were never for once subdued, Jesus, because of his divine nature and Mary, because she was full of grace.

The 2nd Reading (1 Cor 15:20-27) is part of Paul's discourse on the resurrection of Jesus as both the foundation of Christian faith and the sure sign of the resurrection of those who believe in him. The passage contrasts the origin of death through Adam's sin and the new gift of life through the resurrection of Christ (vv.21-22). The resurrection of Christ is presented as only a first fruit, and not the last. Those who belong to him too shall rise from the dead (vv. 20.23). Going further, the passage speaks of Christ's victory over every opposed force (ruler, dominion and power) including the force of death considered as the last or ultimate enemy to be destroyed (vv.24-27). This reveals the fuller implications of Jesus being son of God, just as the Assumption of Mary reveals the fuller implication of her being full of grace and Mother of the Son of the Most-High.

The Gospel Reading (Lk 1:39-56) is the account of Mary's visitation to her cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth may have been Mary's confidant and closest relative. Remember that in the angel's message, he invoked Elizabeth as a reminder to Mary that nothing is impossible with God: he can make in Mary a child out of a young virgin, just as he had made in Elizabeth, her cousin, a child out of an old barren woman (cf. Lk 1:36-37).

The example of Elizabeth was the last word of the angel that culminated in Mary's expression of total submission: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38). Similarly, it was only after Elizabeth's encounter with Mary, confirming that truly, something new and transformative has happened to her, that Mary breaks into her song of rejoicing, celebrating God's history of doing great things with the lowly, the weak, and the hungry who serve him, and for making her part of that history (cf. 1:46-55).

In the Assumption, we celebrate Mary's triumph over sin and the ultimate enemy, death, and we magnify the ineffable and most bountiful God with Mary for choosing her and filling her with fullness of grace, not only at conception and in the course of her life, but also in her death.