

Sermon Given by Rev. Charles Van Vliet, Founding Pastor
Opening Mass of Regina Caeli Parish
Preceded by Installation of Pastor
August 15, 2013

PREAMBLE

I would like to thank Msgr. Scheel and Fr. Cahill for coming this evening to assist with the ceremony and for being very involved in the parish. It was Fr. Cahill who, over the last year, has been in contact with all the staff and helped me in the office of the Chancery, and so I was hoping he would be here. Thank you very much for coming.

I would like to thank all those who helped to prepare the ceremony this evening – setting up the chapel here, as well as the reception afterwards in the Family Life Center, that we use for Mass on Sundays. You are all welcome to come over afterwards to the Family Life Center. It's a little smaller than here, but I am hoping you will stay for the reception. You are all very welcome to come and to celebrate.

There was a lot of preparation for this day carried out by the faithful in the parish and also St. Elizabeth Ann Seton during the two and half weeks I was visiting with my parents and sisters. While I was relaxing in Canada in 70 degree temperatures, they were sweating it out here in Houston. God bless them!

The Coronation of Our Lady in the Traditional calendar falls on May 31st, which will be the feast day for Regina Caeli Parish. In the New Rite, it was switched to August 22nd, which would also be an appropriate day for us to have the celebration. But it has worked out well for us that the parish begins on this feast day vis-à-vis the order of the mysteries of the rosary. When we pray the rosary, we go through the mysteries. The Mystery of the Coronation of Our Lady always follows that of the Assumption of Our Lady in our mediation of the rosary, and so I thought it is kind of fitting, in that way, that we have the beginning of the parish on the Feast of the Assumption.

By the grace of God, who has done His part, the parish is formally established, and we must do our part, to work and build on the 40 acres donated for our purpose. There are a lot of people here this evening who have agreed to support our efforts. God bless you. We have, you know, a long road ahead. So let's keep our prayers going for the parish as we look forward. As we pray the rosary this evening and meditate on the Assumption, may our faith in the Glorious Mysteries make a path to mediate on the Coronation of Our Lady also, and let us ask the Queen of Heaven to help us build our parish.

THE SERMON

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary we celebrate this evening is a feast which was celebrated from the earliest times. It was one of the first Marian feasts to be celebrated in the Church, even though its solemn definition didn't occur until 1950. In this definition, Pope Pius XII did not define whether the Blessed Virgin Mary actually died and was buried and then assumed into Heaven, or whether she went into a deep sleep and was assumed into Heaven. In the East, the latter position is generally maintained - that is, the Dormition of Our Lady, where she falls asleep and was assumed body and soul into Heaven. In the West, we tend to stick to the former position, where she actually died. So either position is able to be held without heresy. The Truth does not define that. The Truth simply defines that at the end of her life, she was assumed body and soul into Heaven.

This should give us great comfort that Our Blessed Mother is in Heaven, body and soul. The arms that held Jesus as an infant - as we see parents holding infants here this evening - are the arms that are in Heaven now. And the arms that held her dead Son after the crucifixion, when His body was taken down from the cross - her arms are in Heaven to greet us when we come. When we die, she can greet us with her arms. So it's a beautiful thing to meditate on, to reflect on: that Our Lady is there in Heaven, body and soul, for us to pray to and to ask for her intercession. She has ears, she can hear our prayers. She is there body and soul. It's a great comfort to us that she is there for us.

We can also reflect on the heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the heart that was pierced out of love at the foot of the cross; that continues to love us from Heaven today. The heart that is wanting us to be with her, that loves us so dearly and is asking for our devotion, and will intercede for us with her Son, so that we can obtain eternal beatitude.

St. Alphonsus Liguori followed the general belief of the West. He died in 1787, before the solemn definition of the Assumption. Now when he discussed the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he spoke of how precious her death was. This may seem odd at first, given that death is a punishment for sin, that she, being all holy and without any stain of sin, should suffer death. And that is what they believe in the East: Our Lady, being so pure, would be exempt from what is the fate for the rest of man, for the rest of simple man. It is for this reason that the East maintains the Dormition.

In the West, we hold that she died because of the perfect union that she had with her Son. Our Lord died, and was buried, and on the third day He rose again. So there is a certain fittingness that His Mother, who as Co-Redemptrix - though that hasn't been defined yet - also died, and was assumed body and soul into Heaven. Her death did not have the same sting that it has for us; rather, St. Alphonsus argued that it would have been a sweet and happy death.

Let us look at the discourse of St. Alphonsus on what generally makes our death so bitter, to see how these things do not in any way define the Blessed Virgin Mary; and then maybe consider our lives, and where we can make changes, so that we can remove this bitterness, this sting of death, by preparing ourselves properly. He brings up three things in particular, though we can come up with more. First of all, attachment to this world. If we are attached to the world, it is going to make our death more bitter. Secondly, remorse for sins. And thirdly, the uncertainty of salvation.

So first of all, the attachments to the world. There is no question, that if we are attached to things of this world, then our separation from them will be bitter. We experience sadness when we are separated from loved ones in this world, particularly if we think that we may never see them again. So this attachment that we have causes us a certain pain when we are separated from them. We can think in terms, perhaps, of our own families if one of our members is in the military and is being sent off to the war zone. The bitterness that we feel, the tears that are shed at the airport in saying goodbye, are very painful because we are being separated, for a time, from someone who loves us. Hopefully he or she makes it safely through the war, but this bitterness gives us a sense of the kind of suffering that we have at the end of our life if we are attached to this world and are being pulled away from it to our death. There is going to be a bitterness - a difficulty - that we end up undergoing because of the result of that. So, we have to try to strive after the detachment which the spiritual rites speak of so often, of being detached from the things of this world. The more we are attached to them, the more the bitterness of death. The more we detach ourselves, as the saints have done - as the Blessed Virgin Mary did - the more our deaths will have less of a sting to them.

Now the Blessed Virgin Mary was purposely united to God and was, in no way, attached to things of this world. She lived a perfectly happy life of poverty, for her heart was already in Heaven. Earthly comforts and riches could have done nothing to make her any happier. She was already perfectly united to God; she was full of grace. She had a detachment from the world, that being detached in that way, she would not be troubled with the approach of death. Rather, death was a time when she would be more perfectly united to God. Such a death would have been sweet and peaceful. When our heart is not here in this world, but rather already in Heaven, our separation from this world to go to Heaven is something which will have a peacefulness to it, which will help us mentally with the transition. So let us strive for a perfect detachment from this world.

Secondly, remorse for sins. The thought of our sins - whether we have made sufficient reparation for them - is another cause for concern at the approach of our death. We can be sure of having the eternal punishment removed through a good heart-felt confession; but there is still the temporal punishment due for our sins, and so we may end up spending time in purgatory. Receiving Last Rites, receiving Extreme Unction, or any apostolic blessing at the hour of death, and a possible confession and Viaticum, will truly comfort the soul; but not everyone

has that opportunity. That is why we should always be prepared for death, by being in a state of grace and striving for the path of perfection. If we do so, God, in His great mercy, will make sure that we have the Last Rites also.

The Blessed Virgin Mary, on the other hand, never had the slightest stain of sin. She always corresponded perfectly with the graces that God bestowed upon her so that she also drew His praise throughout her whole life. She was always pleasing to God, and kindness to her neighbors came very naturally to her. If we strive to be pleasing to God now, and serve Him, serve Christ and our neighbors, we will also be preparing ourselves for a happy death. In living a life of virtue in imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we are avoiding sin, going regularly to confession, and always making reparations for our past sins. Living a life like this - trying to live a life of virtue - is one sure way to help us avoid bitterness at the hour of death and the uncertainty which comes upon us as a result of our past sins. So let us learn this lesson from our heavenly Mother: to strive for the path of perfection and grace.

The third thing that St. Alphonsus brings up is the uncertainty of salvation. Final perseverance is a special gift from God; it is something that we cannot earn. If we live a sinful life without serious effort at reform, this gift is not at all certain. The Blessed Virgin Mary knew that she was in a state of grace, especially with the announcement from the Archangel Gabriel, "Hail, full of grace" (Luke 1:28). For her, salvation was certain and this sting of death did not touch her. She pleased God her entire life. He took her, body and soul into Heaven at the end of her life. She was assumed into Heaven at the end of her life.

Though we cannot earn final perseverance, we can, by living a holy life, dispose ourselves to Him so that God will not deny us this very precious gift either. He created us to be happy with Him for all eternity. He desires us to be with Him. We only have to resolve to remain faithful, to ask for this gift frequently, to strive now to grow in virtue and sanctity. If we are joined to God in the way we live our lives, and we truly want to be with Him for all eternity, He is going to give us the gift of final perseverance.

Our Lady's death, to be followed by great saints like St. Thomas, St. Alphonsus and so many others, was not a painful passage, but a joyful one. Let us ask our Holy Mother, to intercede for us also, so that our passage from this life to eternity can be a joyful one.

Mary, Queen of Heaven, pray for us.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Special thanks to:

Taped by Nas Kurian

Transcribed by Marissa Medlenka