

“Mary, full of grace, first conceived Jesus in her heart before she conceived him in her womb.” These are the words of St Augustine: Mary conceived the Word in her heart, before she conceived him in her womb. Before Mary was found to be with the child Jesus in her womb, she had already conceived Him – the Word of God – in her heart.

In two instances, St Luke (in his Gospel) tells us something simple yet profound about Mary. In Chapter 2:19, when the angels had appeared to the shepherds in the field, telling them about the birth of the Messiah, the shepherd hurried off to Bethlehem and found Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus. They told of what the angels had said to the about the child. Luke tells us that “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Again, in Chapter 2:51, when Jesus had been missing for three days and his parents finally found him, after giving him a bit of a scolding (like any mother would), Luke tells us that Mary “treasured all these things in her heart.”

This attitude, this ready disposition, of pondering, treasuring, reflecting upon the WORD OF GOD present – in the flesh – in her boy child, was surely the same attitude and ready disposition of with which Mary had learned to ponder, treasure, and reflect upon the WORD OF GOD present in the Scriptures her family read as pious Jews.

And that is the character of Mary that you and I are invited to imitate today: the daily contemplation of the WORD OF GOD. In today’s Gospel, when the people had just heard Jesus teaching so eloquently, a woman starts praising Mary for raising such an articulate teacher: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!” she says. Jesus replies: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” Blessed indeed are they who ponder, reflect upon and treasure the Word of God daily in their lives, as Mary did. For they too – who conceive the Word daily in the hearts – shall see the fruits thereof in their lives, just as Mary did, she who conceived the Word in her heart before she conceived him in her womb and whose daily life of earthly was shaped by the written as well as incarnate Word of God.

Blessed indeed is Mary, she who lived by pondering the Word, because (as the Church teaches), Mary **"having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory"**. This is the teaching of the Church that we celebrate today, a teaching which was definitively defined by Pope Pius XII on 1 November 1950... the dogma of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven... a teaching which we reflect upon when we pray the fourth Glorious Myster of the Rosary. We see in this teaching, the final destiny of those who live by daily pondering the Word of God. In this teaching, we look ahead – as it were – with joy, at what lies in store for you and me – if we imitate Mary’s contemplation of the Word in our daily lives.

I mentioned the words of St Augustine: **“Mary, full of grace, first conceived Jesus in her heart before she conceived him in her womb.”** We too are

invited today to imitate this disposition of contemplation. We, upon whom the grace of God was poured at Baptism, are now invited to ponder in our hearts the written WORD in the Scriptures and the Incarnate Word in the Blessed Sacrament. This privilege, which was given to Mary, is also given to you and me. And just as this privilege, this gift, led to Mary's assumption into heaven, so too can it lead us – contemplators of the Word written and Sacramental – into heaven. We pray for this grace today!

Mary Assumed into Heaven is the Patroness of South Africa. In 1952, two years after the dogma of the Assumption was proclaimed, South Africa was placed under the patronage of Mary Assumed into Heaven. The feast day, whose vigil we keep today is, therefore, one of great celebration for our country. Over a year has passed since our country first went into Lockdown. Over 2.5 million cases of Covid-19 infection have been recorded in our country, and sadly, over 76 000 deaths have been recorded to date. Worldwide, the death toll has passed the 4 million mark. As if things couldn't get any worse, political and social instability has also had a negative impact on the lives of our people. As we went in and out of hard lockdown, as churches opened and closed, people's faith, our faith, often dwindled.

It was at this time of Lockdown, when Pope Francis offered Mary as a refuge and intercessor. Just as it is natural for a child to run to "Mommy" in times of danger and distress, the Holy Father entrusted the whole world to the protection of our "Mommy," Mary. By doing this, he has invited the all of us into closer intimacy with Mary. At this time of social distancing, self-isolation, increased fear and heightened anxiety, we are invited to consider Mary not as an abstract intercessor, far removed from our current worries and stresses. No, we are now more than ever invited to consider Mary as a fellow-pilgrim, a fellow contemplative, who ponders daily with us the powerful Word present among us in Scripture and Sacrament. We are to look upon her as a mother who has a proven track record of healing, protecting and watching over God's people.

As we celebrate the heavenly glorification of our fellow-pilgrim and mother, it is only natural that we – her children – rejoice in a special way upon seeing how the most Holy Trinity has honoured her. It was on Calvary that Christ gave her to us as our mother, when he said to St John: "Behold your mother." As John, from that moment onwards, took her into home and life, so too may we today receive her into our homes and lives, in this moment of overwhelming fear, anxiety and grief.

Let us confidently entrust our country and government and citizens to Our Lady, Assumed into Heaven, our patroness.

As we do so, may each of us not forget today's invitation. May we remember St Augustine's words: "**Mary, full of grace, first conceived Jesus in her heart before she conceived him in her womb.**" Today, let us remember

firstly that we, like Mary, have been granted God's grace when we were baptised. And secondly, let us contemplate, ponder, reflect upon the Word of God present in Scripture and in Sacrament. And let us find therein our solace, our peace, and our consolation. If anything, we are reminded today that God is with us, and that where there is God everything eventually works out according to His will. This is our faith and our hope today.

May Mary Assumed into Heaven, patroness of South Africa, who in her Assumption has experienced the fullness of salvation, interceded for us, walk daily with us, and help us ponder the face of Jesus her son, the Eternal Word present among us. May St Joseph, Mary's companion in contemplating the Incarnate Word, also pray for us in this Holy Year dedicated to him.

I end with some words from the prayer that was composed in 1952 at the time of placing South Africa under the patronage of Mary Assumed into Heaven:

O Queen assumed into Heaven with one voice we acclaim thee our Heavenly Patroness, and with filial love we consecrate to thee our country and our people. Through thy prayers, O gracious Mother, may thy Son be known and loved throughout South Africa; may His Kingdom flourish in our land, a Kingdom of justice, truth and peace.

Mary Assumed into Heaven, patroness of South Africa, pray for us.