



Reflection The Solemnity of Our Lady 15 August 2020 by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“My soul give thanks to the Lord”

All over the Catholic world, the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady is celebrated in a joyous way:

My mind goes back to the celebrations on this day in the small town of Rocca di Papa, up on the hillside above the English College Villa at Palazzola, outside Rome. In my days as a young student, we stayed at the Villa the whole Summer, so we took part in the Solemn Mass to mark the Feast. This included a Procession through the town, accompanied by a Band and plenty of flag waving. Then, in the evening, across the lake at Castel Gandolfo, where the Papal Summer Villa is, there was a dramatic firework display. You don't forget the Feast of the Assumption after that experience.

Looking at the history of the Devotion, I found some of the earliest traces in present-day Lebanon. Knowing that Maronite and Melkite Catholics have a strong devotion to Our Lady and with daily horror stories coming out of Beirut in Lebanon, their primary Centre, I was reminded not only that Jesus had gone to the region of Tyre and Sidon, that are in present-day Lebanon, but that there is a village at the Southern end of Lebanon, called Magdousheh, where a Sanctuary dedicated to Our Lady of Mantara is to be found (where Melkite Catholics live today). This boasts an Icon of Our Lady, given by St Helen, mother of Emperor Constantine, in 326. Mantara means “Waiting” and it is said, that Our Lady waited there for Jesus, when he visited Tyre and healed the Syro Phoenician woman.

Near Beirut, at Harissa, is the major Maronite shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon, which was visited by Pope St John Paul II in 1997. Lebanon, despite the recent influx of mainly Muslim refugees from Syria, remains about 1/3 Christian, and is the main centre of trade and culture in the Middle East. You will have noticed President Macron of France has been playing an important part in international efforts to support the recovery of Beirut, following the recent disaster in which many died and some 300-400 thousand homes were destroyed. Macron's leadership goes back historically to the role given France after World War I in 1920. By the way, Lebanon has played a key role in International cuisine, giving us dishes such as stuffed grape leaves, kibbeh, tabooli, hummus, falafel, baba ganoush and baklava.

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I have been particularly interested in Lebanon because of meeting Lebanese Catholics here, and also because of the different Eastern Catholic Liturgies, that emanate from that part of the world, and play an increasingly important part in Christian Ethnic Communities here – I am the Archbishop’s Co-ordinator of Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Diocese.

So, in Lebanon, whose political and economic woes, we are all conscious of, we find the oldest centre of Devotion to Mary in the world, after St Mary Major in Rome.

Though the Assumption of Our Lady was only defined as a Dogma in 1950 by Pope St Pius XII, it has always been part of our belief and devotion. Here, we have the role of Mary conceived Immaculate as Mother of Jesus, proclaimed as the one who has gone before us to Heaven:

- “the woman adorned with the sun and standing on the moon, and with 12 stars on her head for a crown” spoken of in the vision of John, is the first reading for the Feast from the Apocalypse.
- the first, after Jesus her Son, to experience being “brought to new life in Christ.” The life we look forward to, spoken of in the 2nd reading from St Paul to the Corinthians.
- and the woman who teaches us to give thanks for all we are called to with the Magnificat in the Gospel for the Feast: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exults in God my saviour”

Yes, this Feast is a cause for celebration: as Mary follows her son into Glory, so we look forward in Faith to that day, already giving thanks.

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