

Homily based on the readings from August 15, 2024 (Revelation 11.19a, 12.1-6a, 10ab, 13-14; 1 Corinthians 15.20-27; Luke 1.39-56)

Today's Gospel reading is a treasure trove of Christian prayer. First and foremost, it describes Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, which itself is the Second Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. We also witness the origin of two fundamental Christian prayers. Elizabeth declares:

Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

We recognize this sentence, of course, as being a component of the *Hail Mary*, one of our most basic, timeless prayers. The Blessed Mother herself presents a longer prayer, beginning with the line "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord." This prayer, typically called the *Magnificat*, is part of Evening Prayer, or vespers, which is prayed every day – at the very least in every monastic community around the world and by every member of the clergy. When we pray the Magnificat, we

are echoing Mary's boundless joy and wonder at the fact that she is bearing the Son of God in her own womb.

In both of these prayers, and in the reading itself, there is a key word that keeps being repeated: *blessed* are you among women, *blessed* is the fruit of your womb, *blessed* are you who believed, all generations will call me *blessed*. In reality, though, these are two slightly different words. In the original Greek, and in the subsequent Latin, the two "blesseds" from the Hail Mary – *blessed* are you among women, *blessed* is the fruit of your womb – really mean *honored*, or more precisely *spoken well of*. The Latin word is *benedicta* or *benedictus*. The other two "blesseds" – *blessed* are you who believed and all generations will call me *blessed* – mean *gladdened* or *enriched*. The Latin here is *beata*, as in the Beatitudes. The Virgin Mary, the *Blessed* Mother, fully embodies both senses of this word.

Consider the second sense of the word *blessed*: namely *gladdened* or *enriched*. There is no question that – among the billions of humans who

have walked the earth and the countless angels abiding in heaven – Mary is by far the most blessed of all created beings. This blessing comes directly from her utterly unique relationship with Jesus Christ. As the bishops declared at the Second Vatican Council:

Redeemed by reason of the merits of her Son and united to him by a close and indissoluble tie, she is endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of the Son of God, by which account she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this gift of sublime grace, she far surpasses all creatures [all created beings], both in heaven and on earth. (LG 53)

Just like all of us, Mary was redeemed by Jesus Christ. Unlike any of us, she bore the Son of God in her own womb.

It is this sense of blessedness – her unique connection to Jesus Christ – that forms the basis for today's celebration, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the words of Pope Pius XII:

[We see] the loving Mother of God as it were before our very eyes as most intimately joined to her divine Son and as always sharing his lot. Consequently it seems impossible to think of her, the one who conceived Christ, brought him forth, nursed him with her milk, held him in her arms, and clasped him to her breast, as being apart from him in body, even though not in soul, after this earthly life. Since our Redeemer is the Son of Mary, he could not do otherwise, as the perfect observer of God's law, than to honor, not only his eternal Father, but also his most beloved Mother. (MD 38)

As Catholics, we rejoice to proclaim 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.” God would not allow his own mother to suffer death and decay, but prepared a place for her with the tenderness of a loving son.

Let us return briefly to first sense of the word “blessed” – *being spoken well of*: “blessed are you among women.” That form of blessedness comes with an obligation to all of us. Do *we* speak well of the Blessed Mother? That is not just a question of respect, but a matter of love.

When our Lord was dying on the Cross, he entrusted his Blessed Mother and his Beloved Disciple to each other’s care: “Woman, behold, your son!” and “Behold, your mother!” That relationship carries through to every member of the Church. To quote Pope St. John Paul II, who had a profound and lifelong devotion to the Blessed Mother:

Mary is present in the Church as the Mother of Christ, and at the same time as that Mother whom Christ, in the mystery of the Redemption, gave to humanity in the person of the Apostle John. Thus, in her new motherhood in the Spirit, Mary embraces each and every one in the Church, and embraces each and every one through the Church. (RM 47)

Mary’s relationship with Christ is unparalleled, but she longs to share that relationship *personally* with each one of us. Our connection with

the Blessed Mother is not *only* expressed through reverence to sacred images and statues – through pious litanies and prayers – but through the primal love between a mother and her child. By the grace of God, the arms that cradled him as a baby have been taken up to heaven. Those same arms are now beckoning all her children to follow her example, to join with her in the loving embrace of Jesus Christ.