

LEADER



GOD IS FAITHFUL

A Retreat Guide on Mary's Assumption into Heaven

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FIRST MEDITATION

MARY AS A MODEL OF FAITHFULNESS

INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, Mary was given special graces, most especially that of the Immaculate Conception, by which she was preserved from the stain and effects of original sin.

BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVED

But the Church doesn't present her to us as a model and example just because of the special graces she received. Rather, the Church wants us to pay attention to how she responded to those graces. And the one word that sums up her response is faithfulness. She believed so strongly in God that she accepted and embraced his will for her life unconditionally. That's why St. Elizabeth was able to say of her, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Luke 1:45). She believed in the Lord, day after day, and she let the Lord of the universe truly become the Lord of her own daily life. This faithfulness is what God rewarded by giving Mary the grace of her Assumption into heaven.

Back in the eighteenth century, Pope Clement XI wrote a little prayer that sums up this attitude of faithfulness. He wrote it in Latin, and you find many different translations into English, but here is the most literal translation possible:

*I want whatever you want;
I want it how you want it;
I want it because you want it;
I want it for however long you want it.*

That's what faithfulness really is, a union of wills, a commitment to stay united in desire and decision with the one we love. It's the perfect expression of love, because it involves self-forgetfulness: Instead of focusing on my own natural preferences, I focus on God and what his infinite wisdom is calling me to. I reach out to God and allow him to direct my life, channeling all my creativity into fulfilling the mission that he gives me.

HANDMAID OF THE LORD

Mary exhibits this attitude, a combination of humility, courage, and trust, throughout her life.

Her response to the Archangel Gabriel during the Annunciation is a perfect summary of it. When the angel unfolds God's plan for her to become the mother of the Messiah, although she doesn't understand how it will happen, she accepts it, saying:

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.

—Luke 1:38

Notice that she doesn't just obey mechanically, as if she really had no choice. She doesn't just say, "Okay Lord, whatever..." She prefaces her act of obedience with a loving act of faith and humility that reveals how she viewed herself in relation to God. "Behold," she says, "I am the handmaid of the Lord." She recognizes that God really is God, that she is dependent on him, and that her very identity consists of being in a relation of dependence on and service towards God.

This deep awareness of our true relation to God—that we are created by him, dependent on him, and that we find our meaning and fulfillment by living in a loving and obedient communion with him—is the underlying foundation of our faithfulness. Ever since original sin, in which our first parents rebelled against this true relationship with God, that foundation has been shaky. In order for us to build our lives on it, we have to repair it, little by little, with the help of God's grace.

THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD

And Mary gives us some useful tools to make that happen: Her own example, of course, and also her famous prayer, the Magnificat. This is her expression of joy at God's choice of her to be the mother of the Messiah. In this prayer, she reveals again the true and proper relationship between herself and the Lord. Throughout this hymn of praise, which the Church uses every single day during its official evening prayer,



Mary expresses her confidence in God's omnipotence, faithfulness, and gentle mercy. And she points out that only the humble, only those who accept their own limitations, create space in their lives to experience the saving action of God. "My spirit rejoices in God my savior," she proclaims, "For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness... His mercy is from age to age, to those who fear him..."

Our faithfulness to God, like Mary's, can't come simply from the strength of our determination. It has to flow from a deep awareness of God's greatness, of his presence and loving power, of his faithfulness to us. Only then can we truly trust God enough to find the strength to accept and fulfill his will in our lives, as he gradually makes it known to us.

CONCLUSION: MARY'S LAST WORDS

The last words Mary speaks in the Bible drive this lesson home for all of us. The scene is the famous wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned dozens of gallons of water into fine wine at Mary's request.

In this encounter, Mary shows that her faithfulness to God is more than just an abstract, pie-in-the-sky kind of piety; it's also practical. She is the first one to recognize that a crisis is brewing when she sees that the wine is running out. Weddings in Palestine at that time were elaborate affairs. The whole village would celebrate a wedding for an entire week. For the wine to run out would be a public embarrassment for the family, casting a permanent shadow over what should be some of the young couple's most joyful memories.


Mary comes to Jesus to get him to avert the disaster, and he gives her a cryptic answer that still inspires contradictory explanations by biblical scholars. But Mary then brings together some servants, presents them to Jesus, says to them: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5), and Jesus performs his miracle.

Those are her last words in Scripture. And they are an exhortation to be faithful to God, to trust that he knows what he is doing and that if we simply accept and embrace his will in our lives, everything will turn out well.

That can be extremely difficult for us to believe when the storms of life come crashing down on us. And yet, Mary puts no qualifiers on her last exhortation. She doesn't say, "Do whatever he tells you as long as you

understand it," or "Do almost everything he tells you except when it's really hard and will cause problems." No, she simply says: "Do whatever he tells you." Her confidence in God's unfailing faithfulness is absolute. She knows that God is all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving. If we throw ourselves onto his mercy, we will not be disappointed.

And the end of her earthly journey gives complete credibility to those last words. She did all that God asked of her, she trusted him totally, humbly accepting and embracing his will throughout her many trials, and she did not lose her reward. As the Catechism puts it:

 ...the Immaculate Virgin ... when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things ...

—CCC 966

If we too enter into this dynamism of mutual faithfulness, we too can be assured that in the end all things will work out for good, and we will not lose our reward.

Let's take some time now, in the silence of our hearts, to give Mary's example of faithfulness a chance to comfort and inspire us. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. On a scale of one to ten, how strong would I rate my trust in God? What keeps me from trusting him more than I do?
2. Mary is the greatest saint the world has ever known, and yet she didn't leave any impressive accomplishments or achievements behind her at the end of her life—no books, no buildings, no institutions... What can this tell me about the nature of true holiness?
3. Have I ever felt that God was asking something of me, and I denied it to him? How did that affect my relationship with him? What is God asking of me right now, and how am I responding?



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SECOND MEDITATION

MARY'S ASSUMPTION—THE WAY OF THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

The Church has always presented Mary as an example for us to follow individually, as the model Christian. But Mary's experience is also understood by theologians to be a kind of pattern for the whole Church. This is especially the case with her Assumption. To understand why, we need to go back to some of the basics of our faith.

WHERE HISTORY IS GOING

The foundations of Christ's Kingdom are laid, but he hasn't yet finished building it up. He is still extending its borders and gathering more and more people into it. This is the work of the Church militant, the pilgrim Church here on earth. As members of that Church, this is our work: to build up Christ's Kingdom, to bring more and more people into his friendship, so that they follow him and find the meaning their lives are meant to have.

But what will happen at the end of history? What will the Church become when the years of building reach their completion? This is where the pattern set by Mary's Assumption gives us supernatural insight.

In a sense, every aspect of Mary's life is a kind of pattern for the whole life of the Church. Mary brought the baby Jesus into the world on the first Christmas, took care of him as he grew to manhood, and accompanied him as he fulfilled his mission. The Church as a whole has a similar relationship with the mystical body of Christ—and with every Christian, the members of that body. The Church continually brings Christ into the world through her many works of charity and apostolate, and especially through bringing more Christians into the world by baptism. And with her teaching and sacraments, the Church cares for and accompanies her members as they grow to maturity and carry out their missions. And so, just as God assumed Mary into heaven, body and soul, at the end of her earthly mission, so God will lift the whole Church into perfect communion with himself in heaven at the end of history.

Mary's Assumption, then, is not only God's promise to be faithful to us as individuals, but it is an expression of

God's promise of faithfulness to the Church as a whole. Every Christian who follows Mary's path of humility and fidelity to God's will can look forward to following her into the glories and joys of heaven. Every Christian who faithfully participates in the life of the Church will also experience the Church's assumption into heaven—so to speak—at the end of history.

ON FRYING PANS AND BIG FISH

It's important for us to remember this bigger picture. That's one of the reasons the Church celebrates the Assumption so solemnly. God wants our faith to be big, strong, and robust, like Mary's. He wants us to remember that he is powerful and magnificent and does wonderful things in and through and for those people who really trust him, as Mary did. He wants us to remember that our daily lives as Catholics are part of a much bigger story than we can fully grasp. This keeps our souls open to greatness, the spiritual greatness that all of us are called to.

A well-known fishing story illustrates the importance of remembering the big picture that our faith paints for us. Two men went fishing. One man was an experienced fisherman; the other wasn't. Every time the experienced fisherman caught a big fish, he put it in his ice chest to keep it fresh. Whenever the inexperienced fisherman caught a big fish, he threw it back. The experienced fisherman watched this go on all day and finally got tired of seeing this man waste good fish. "Why do you keep throwing back all the big fish you catch?" He finally asked. The inexperienced fisherman replied, "Well, I only have a small frying pan."

Sometimes, like that fisherman, we throw back the big plans, big dreams, big ideas, big opportunities that God sends us, because our faith is too small. We laugh at that fisherman who made bad decisions because he was fixated on the small size of his frying pan; yet how ready are we to increase the size of our faith?

God has big hopes for us, Assumption-sized hopes. Seeing how his hopes for the Blessed Virgin Mary were so wonderfully fulfilled should help increase our faith. It should stretch out our frying pan. As the



angel Gabriel said to Mary long before her glorious Assumption, “nothing is impossible to God” (Luke 1:37).

PETER’S ARK

One of the favorite images used by early Christian artists to represent the Church was a huge ship with the Pope at its helm. The Church is like a spiritual version of Noah’s Ark. This fallen world is flooded with sin, temptation, and suffering. But God has provided us with a dependable vessel to sail us safely through all that. The ship itself is made of normal, natural, earthly material—human beings just like us, with all our flaws and failures. But it is held together, protected, and guided by something supernatural, something infallible and indestructible: the Holy Spirit.

As long as we stay on the ship—that is, as long as we continue participating in the life of the Church through receiving the sacraments, learning her doctrine, and engaging in her mission—we are safe, and our lives will be fruitful and meaningful, both here on earth and later, for all eternity, in heaven. Storms will come, and blinding fog, and hardships, but the bark of Peter is divinely guaranteed to successfully reach the harbor of heaven.

As the Second Reading for the Solemnity of the Assumption shows us, God will save Christ and the Church from the dragon’s grasp. This is his promise. And just to make sure that life’s troubles and hardships don’t throw us into doubt and discouragement, Jesus ratified that guarantee and proved his faithfulness by taking his Mother, the Mother of the Church, the first Christian, up into heaven, body and soul. That is what we celebrate every August 15th on the Solemnity of the Assumption.

CONCLUSION: A LITURGICAL LIFT

This truth is given special attention by the preface to the Eucharistic Prayer used during the liturgical celebration of the Assumption. During the preface, the priest prays:

“Today the virgin Mother of God was taken up into heaven to be the beginning and the pattern of the Church in its perfection, and a sign of hope and comfort for your people on their pilgrim way.

Why is the Assumption a sign of hope and comfort?

Because earth is not heaven. Life in this fallen world is full of doubts, difficulties, sufferings, and pain. Our efforts to follow Christ face obstacle after obstacle. We don’t understand why God doesn’t fix things. We are traveling through life in the midst of problems, troubles, and frustration, and we can’t see the way out.

But whenever we lift our gaze to Mary, standing in heaven at the right hand of our Lord, as the Psalm for the liturgy of the Assumption tells us, we are given the assurance that our God is faithful. If we stay true to him we can’t go wrong; he will be true to us.

As members of the Church, our lives are part of a much bigger story than we can really grasp. And as that story unfolds, Mary’s Assumption can be an ongoing source of hope and comfort. Let’s take some time now to let these truths sink into our hearts and minds. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How often do I think about the end of history and the Church’s promised victory over evil and suffering? How would my daily life change if I thought about it more often?
2. Where do I generally go when I need a dose of “hope and comfort”? How do I feel about turning to the Blessed Virgin Mary in those moments? Why?
3. What has the Solemnity of Mary’s Assumption meant for me up to this point in my spiritual journey? What would I like it to mean for me in the future?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

“Almighty ever-living God, who assumed the Immaculate Virgin Mary, the Mother of your Son, body and soul into heavenly glory, grant, we pray, that, always attentive to the things that are above, we may merit to be sharers of her glory ... For today the Virgin Mother of God was assumed into heaven as the beginning and image of your Church’s coming to perfection and a sign of sure hope and comfort to your pilgrim people; rightly you would not allow her to see



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CONFERENCE

THE ART OF CONTEMPLATING ART

INTRODUCTION

Mary's faithfulness to God, flowing from a deep awareness of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness, was beautifully rewarded by her Assumption into heaven. Through the Assumption, Mary became not only an example for every individual Christian to follow, but also a pattern for what the Church as a whole will experience at the end of history. Turning our gaze towards Mary, then, can open up a source of hope and comfort for us as we make our way through the storms and troubles of life in this fallen world.

ART AS A BRIDGE TO CONTEMPLATION

But how exactly do we "turn our gaze towards Mary"? Meditation and study are excellent ways to do that, but through the centuries the Church has developed an even more direct and simpler way. It consists of keeping artistic images of the Blessed Virgin close at hand, and contemplating them frequently. The image serves as a reminder of all that she teaches us, of all that she stands for. It can also remind us to pray to her, to ask for her intercession. Like any photograph of a loved one, images of the Blessed Virgin keep us tuned in to her presence and inspire us to persevere in our journey of faith—the more beautiful the image, the more fruitful our contemplation will be.

The history of Christian art has given us a vast treasure trove of beautiful representations of Mary and the different mysteries of faith associated with her life. But those works of art, like all works of sacred art, can be much more than just pretty decoration in our lives. They can actually feed our souls, if we let them.

In this conference, we will reflect briefly on the role that art can play in our spiritual growth, and on how learning to contemplate great art can be an antidote for some of today's cultural ills.

ART SEASONED WITH GRACE

I would like to begin with a disclaimer. Just because art can be and has been used to foster spiritual growth,

that doesn't mean that great art has some kind of magical property, as if it were a shortcut to holiness. Plenty of art connoisseurs know how to appreciate great art, even great religious art, but never experience spiritual growth as a result of their connoisseurship. Plenty of art experts can lecture for hours about Rafael and Pinturicchio, and yet no Renaissance masterpiece has ever moved them to prayer. The Church has always encouraged the production of sacred art, its use in worship and liturgy, and its value as an expression of and stimulus to faith. But, clearly, sacred art doesn't automatically feed the soul. Something has to happen to make that connection take place.

What allows great art to become soulful nourishment is, primarily, grace. God's grace releases the transforming power of beauty in our souls, whether that beauty flows from art or nature. The history of spirituality shows two broad categories of experience in which grace activates the potential of great art.

SURPRISED BY BEAUTY

First, we can be surprised by beauty. God can recruit beauty to knock us out of our comfort zones, to open the eyes of our souls to the transcendent dimension of faith. In this context, beauty has played a key role in many conversions—conversions from sin, as well as conversions to the Catholic faith. I know a priest whose vocation began one day while he was sitting in the upper rows of a concert hall listening to an entirely secular performance of a Mozart Mass. The beauty of that music became an occasion of grace for him.

I personally experienced this from the inside out. My own conversion to the Catholic faith began with a college semester overseas, studying art and cultural history in Florence, Italy. There, I truly fell in love with the Church through her art and architecture. It was as if the Lord was wooing me with artistic beauty, using it to open my mind and my heart to new dimensions of Christian discipleship. All my free time was spent gazing at sacred art, and immersing my soul in the sacred space of architecture. I couldn't get enough of it. I was dramatically surprised by beauty, and it altered the entire course of my life. God knows how to reach




the hearts of his children, and some of those hearts will respond especially well to artistic beauty.

PRAYERFULLY CONTEMPLATING ART

But we don't have to wait around and hope that God surprises us. We can intentionally grace-ify—so to speak—our own contemplation of sacred art. I use the term “contemplation” here in its general sense, not in the technical sense of infused contemplation.

It's very simple, really. Just as we can open a sacred text, or a spiritual commentary on a sacred text, and read and reflect on it in order to enter into mental prayer or Christian meditation, we can do the same with a work of sacred art. We can enter into God's presence, and then turn our attention to him and listen to him speak in our souls through “reading” and “reflecting” on a work of sacred art. The great works of Christian art include deep insights into our faith; they are as legitimate commentaries on scripture and Christian history as are the written commentaries of spiritual authors.

Artists have been given the gift of perception and communication; they have something to show us. As Blessed Pope Paul VI put it in a speech when he addressed artists: “You have aided [the Church] in translating her divine message in the language of forms and figures, making the invisible world palpable.”^[1] St. John Paul II expressed this gift of the artist even more intensely in a speech he gave when visiting Ireland. He said:

 *Every piece of art, be it religious or secular, be it a painting, a sculpture, a poem or any form of handicraft made by loving skill, is a sign and a symbol of the inscrutable secret of human existence, of man's origin and destiny, of the meaning of his life and work. It speaks to us of the meaning of birth and death, of the greatness of man.*^[2]

Taking time to prayerfully “read” or “listen to” a great work of art, then, can lead to a deeply enriching spiritual experience.

[1] Blessed Pope Paul VI, Address to Artists (at the closing of the Second Vatican Council), 8 December 1965.

[2] St. John Paul II, Address at Clonmacnois, 30 September 1979.

LEARNING TO LOOK

In order to do this kind of reading, we usually need to learn the grammar and syntax of art, at least the basics. This includes both learning how to look and listen, by studying the structure and dynamics of the different art forms, and also familiarizing ourselves with the specific insights and concerns of artists in the different periods and contexts of art history. A Renaissance Madonna, for example, is seeking to communicate something very different than a Byzantine Icon of the Madonna. Learning the grammar of each style better enables us to hear what specific works of art may be saying.

Formal study of these things is not strictly necessary. Certain personalities are naturally sensitive to aesthetic experiences and can naturally “read” works of art. And we can all learn to nourish our souls in this way simply through spending more time with works that we are spontaneously drawn to. All forms of art have been used as vehicles for expressing the truths of our faith, and so all forms of art can be contemplated as a way of entering into mental prayer. From painting to music, from poetry to architecture, from performance to sculpture, the great achievements of art open up ample vistas for study and contemplation.

UNIQUE BENEFITS OF PRAYING WITH ART

Should everyone explore this arena of spiritual activity? Should everyone make an effort to allow great art to feed their souls? It certainly can't hurt to try. And I strongly believe that it can really, really help.

Today's culture promotes an unhealthy over-indulgence in extreme emotion. It makes an idol out of strong feelings. As Christians, we are rightly suspicious of that, and resist it. We rightly strive to live our lives and make our decisions based on solid faith, not based on whimsical feelings. And yet, to grow to spiritual maturity includes not just disciplining our emotional life, but really integrating it into our relationship with God, really allowing it to flourish under the sure guidance of reason enlightened by faith.

Great art can be a strong ally in that effort. Art, the expression and experience of beauty, brings together—aligns and integrates—the mind, the senses, and the emotions. And sacred art is the highest expression of art. Bringing the contemplation of art into our lives, therefore, is a practical way to be proactive in the healthy integration of our emotions into our relationship with God.



CONCLUSION: MARIAN BEAUTY

Maybe this is why so many of the great works of Christian art through the centuries have depicted the Blessed Virgin Mary. Children learn to manage and integrate their emotional worlds primarily from their mothers. In the order of grace, Mary is our mother, the mother of every Christian. The great works of art depicting her mirror her own spiritual maturity and harmony. By gazing at them, contemplating them, and giving them a place in our life of prayer, they can become bridges of grace, stirring reminders of all that she has to teach us about the path to intimacy with God.

A lot more could be said about art—where it gets its power, what beauty really is, how to unlock its secrets more easily ... Maybe in future Retreat Guides we can explore some of these useful and interesting questions. But for now, I want to leave you with a quotation from Pope Benedict XVI about the importance of rediscovering art as a path to deeper prayer. Here is how he put it in one of his weekly audiences:

“On several occasions in recent months, I have recalled the need for every Christian to find time for God, for prayer, amidst our many daily activities. The Lord himself offers us many opportunities to remember Him. Today, I would like to consider briefly one of these channels that can lead us to God and also be helpful in our encounter with Him: It is the way of artistic expression, part of that “via pulchritudinis”—“way of beauty”—which I have spoken about on many occasions, and which modern man should recover in its most profound meaning... Dear friends, I invite you to rediscover the importance of this way for prayer, for our living relationship with God.

—Wednesday Catechesis, 31 August 2011

Mary’s Assumption can be a source of hope, instruction, and comfort for all of us, if we learn to lift our gaze to her in our times of need. Great works of art can help us do that.

Take some time now to reflect prayerfully on the personal questionnaire, which is designed to help you find ways to apply these general truths to the specific circumstances of your daily life.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. So far in my spiritual journey, what has helped me most in developing a sense of Mary’s presence in the Church and in my Christian life? Why?
2. What is my favorite artistic image of the Blessed Virgin Mary? Why? What does that image say to me and how does it affect me?
3. Where do I usually go to look for inspiration and renewed spiritual energy? Why do I go there, and how does it help me?
4. Commenting on a beautiful Christian film, one Catholic Cardinal said in an interview:

“Seeing this film provokes love in your heart, and compassion. It makes you want to love more, to forgive, to be good and strong no matter what, just as Christ was good and strong even in the face of such terrible suffering.

Has any work of art (painting, music, sculpture, film, etc.) ever provoked that kind of reaction in me? Remember and savor that experience.

5. The Catechism (#1146) points out:

“... As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols ...

Think of some examples of this in your own life. How does it apply to your relationship with God?

6. Advertisements use images and music and other artistic forms. What’s the difference between an advertisement and a work of art?
7. What images do I usually fill my mind with? Do these images help me or hinder me in my path toward God and toward spiritual growth?
8. What effect does the music I usually listen to have on my soul? Socrates once said that he would prefer to be in charge of a society’s music instead of its laws, because the music has a stronger influence over the culture. What might he have meant by that?



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FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Hail, Holy Queen*
by Scott Hahn
- *The Glories of Mary*
by St. Alphonsus Liguori
- *Mother of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Mater)*
by St. John Paul II
- *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*
by Jacques Maritain
- *Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts*
by Joshua Taylor
- *The Art of Faith*
by Judith Couchman

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