Our Undying Lady:
The Case for Mary's Preservation from Death

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Introduction

Though little attention has been devoted to the question of the Blessed Virgin's immortality since the years immediately following the promulgation of *Munificentissimus Deus*, whether or not the Mother of God died is a live question in Catholic theology.[35] That there has not been a good deal of sustained reflection on this matter is somewhat puzzling, for it seems to have been a most pressing question to arise on the heels of *Munificentissimus Deus*, primarily due to the fact that the language of the definition was, by most accounts, rather ambivalent.[36] Should the Church make any additional dogmatic statement about Mary, it is conceivable that it be on this point, even if the possibility is a remote.

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[35] "Since 1950, there has been no significant development of doctrine on the topic. The church, therefore, has no dogmatic position on the question. Discussion of it remains within the scope of speculative theology" (Paul Griffiths, *Decreation* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014], 156). Griffiths briefly addresses this issue as part of his discussion on the nature of human flesh. Though he does not offer a thorough defense of the view that Mary never died, he seems to consider this the more reasonable opinion. This is confirmed in an essay of his that appeared around the same time, in which he brings out the inconsistencies of Newman's proclamations relating to Mary's death along with her privileges (Paul Griffiths, "Did Mary Die? Newman on Sin, Death, and Mary's Mortality," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 13.2 [2015], 379–98).

[36] See, for example, Bertin Farrell's treatment of the discussion and subsequent defense of the opinion that Mary did not die: "The Immortality of the Blessed Virgin," *Theological Studies* 16, no. 4 (1955): 591–606. He states, "There was more unanimity in regard to the *terminus ad quem* of the Assumption than in regard to the *terminus a quo*. The bone of contention was supplied by the words, 'expleto terrestris vitae cursu' .... It is generally recognized that the Bull, *Munificentissimus Deus*, has left the question, whether Mary died or not, to the free discussion of theologians. It is likewise generally recognized that the opinion of those who hold that Mary did not die is gaining adherents. For that reason, a discussion of their opinion would seem timely" (591, 593). Happily, since this was a topic of concern between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, much of the research concerning the data of tradition has already been carried out and is readily available. A 1957 volume of the periodical *Marian Studies* (vol. 8) was devoted to this theme and presents articles covering the patristic, scholastic, and liturgical witness as well as one article addressing the question in light of the Bull of 1950.

This essay, wherein I offer support for the opinion that Mary did not die, is intended merely to kindle the speculative theological dialogue which was quite aflame until the 1960s. It is, in part, a response to a recent invitation to take up one of the many "beautifully colored threads of reflection on Mary" that were left hanging after Vatican II.[37]

Since this is not a commonly treated theological topic, it may be asked what importance is attached to the question. What difference does it make whether or not the Blessed Virgin died? One way of answering this is to appeal to the divine works of creation and redemption. Though the Creator is not responsible for the ruin caused by the free creatures' misuse of freedom,[38] it can be difficult to escape the feeling that the fall of creation somehow drags down the honor of the Creator. Many have echoed the lament of the psalmist: "Remember what my being is: for have you created all the sons of men in vain? What man is there who shall live and not see death?"[39] Death is universal, but the Christian faith teaches that this would not have been the case if humans had remained in the state of grace in which they were created. Human persons, made in the divine image, were meant to be immortal human persons.[40] If all humans suffer death, even if it is not a permanent state, it seems that the divine intention for humanity is not perfectly actualized in any human person. But if Mary did not die, then she is the answer to the psalmist's

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[37] John Cavadini and Danielle Peters, eds., *Mary on the Eve of the Second Vatican Council* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2017), 2. Whether or not this is one of the "flood of Marian speculations" Balthasar had in mind, "that ... were incapable of bearing lasting fruit," I cannot say (Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama III: Dramatis Personae*, trans. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992], 316).

[38] "Do not invite death by the error of your life, or bring on destruction by the works of your hands; because God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them, and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal" (Wis 1:12–15 [NRSV]). Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent citations of Scripture are from the NRSV.

[39] Ps 88:47, 48 (LXX).

[40] Considered apart from God's intentions for human persons, who are beings composed of both body and soul, many would argue that the rational soul is in itself immortal in distinction from the body which is in itself subject to disintegration. Because of the body's natural mortality, any overcoming of this limit must be due to grace. Given the soul's inherent immortality, the question of the immortality of the human *person* becomes more focused on the corruptibility of the body. And the prelapsarian *state* of grace, as it relates to immortality, pertains more to the body than to the soul.

question. *Not* all mere humans were created in vain; one lived and never died.[41]

In a similar way, Mary's immortality could be seen as perfecting the divine work of human redemption—the stroke of the brush that completes a masterpiece. Death, according to much of the tradition, is that from which humans were in greatest need of deliverance after the fall. Death is the ultimate adversary, over which Christ gained victory for us through his own death and resurrection, and it will be decisively abolished when the fruits of Christ's resurrection are applied to all humanity. But there is a nagging question behind all of this. Is death really "swallowed up in victory" if it must still be tasted by all? When, like the rain, it still falls on the just and the unjust alike? By asking this, I do not mean to cast a shadow on the divine plan of redemption. On the contrary, I mean to question whether or not we have actually grasped the depths of it. For if the Son of God took his mother into heavenly beatitude without her ever undergoing the separation of soul and body, then she would represent for all humanity the *utter* victory of life over death—a victory won by Christ and preeminently manifest in Mary.[42] Contemplation of the end of Mary's earthly life, like all contemplation about her, is also contemplation of her Son. So, I would suggest that inasmuch as it is good to ponder the profundity of God's redeeming love in Christ, it is just as good to ponder this question of the immortality of the Mother of God.[43]

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[41] Leaving aside for now the question of Enoch and Elijah, as well as Mary's participation in the death of her son, which was a kind of death for her, regardless of what happened at the end of her terrestrial life.

[42] That in Mary we see the epitome of Christ's redeeming work was a common way of defending or understanding the dogma of the Assumption in the 1950s, even by Catholic theologians with a reputation for espousing subdued Marian views. In one of Karl Rahner's earlier works, for example, he arrives at this *Grundprinzip*: "Mary is redeemed in the most perfect way" (Peter Joseph Fritz, "Karl Rahner's Marian 'Minimalism,'" in *Mary on the Eve of the Second Vatican Council*, 160; Karl Rahner, "Die Assumptio-Arbeit von 1951 mit den Ergänzungen bis 1959," *Maria, Mutter des Hern: Mariologische Studien, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 9, ed. Regina Pacis Meyer [Freiburg: Herder, 2004], 284). If this principle demands belief in her Assumption, it seems reasonable that it could at least cause reflection on the question of whether Mary's dying would *detract* from the perfection of her redemption.

[43] In addition to this, Griffiths notes the theological benefit such a pursuit: "Addressing it [the question of Mary's death] brings clarity about the relation between sin and death,

It will be clear from what follows, but I should note at the outset that although the conclusion that Mary did not "go the way of all the earth" follows most naturally from the established principles of Catholic theology—especially the dogmatic proclamations about Mary made in the past two centuries—there are good reasons for non-Catholics to consider this question as well. In order to open this discussion to a diverse audience, I have tried to approach the issue from several directions: theological, biblical-typological, historical, and speculative. Among other things, my consideration of the theological grounds for believing that Mary was preserved from death appeals to the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. Though he took the position that Mary died as a result of her contracting original sin and in order to be conformed to the death of Christ, reading Aquinas in light of the truth of the Immaculate Conception proves to be, I think, a valuable exercise. The Bible does not speak of the end of Mary's life in narrative form, but this does not mean there is a complete want of Scriptural support for her immortality. My biblical consideration of the issue takes the form of a typological reading of the creation account in Genesis along with a brief examination of John's Apocalypse and a reflection on the atonement ritual as described in the book of Leviticus. The historical evidence to be considered is actually, as some have pointed out previously, the *lack* of evidence relating to Mary's earthly end from very early on, as well as a long tradition of linguistic ambiguity in speaking of her end. I will conclude with a speculative account of Mary's Dormition considered as the ecstatic, but not actual, separation of soul from body brought about by Christ's granting his mother's longing to see him in his heavenly glory. Since Orthodox theologians have themselves pointed out that the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception ought to entail Mary's freedom from death, but that the Dormition tradition clearly assumes her death (and thus one of these must be wrong), it is my intention that the last section be taken as a possible way of reconciling the two positions.

Theological Considerations

A common way to approach the question of Mary's immortality is to consider the connection between sin and death.[44] The inseparable

and there is no doubt that the proper construal of that relation is of central importance to the grammar of Christian thought" (Griffiths, "Did Mary Die?" 380).

[44] According to Fr. Juniper Carol, a mid-twentieth century Mariologist who gathered and published much of the material surrounding this debate, this is really the only way of

relation of these two evils is attested throughout Scripture, but it is made especially apparent in the Pauline corpus.[45] Death, whether considered as the separation of soul and body or as the separation of the soul from God, is the result of sin. All humans are born (or conceived) under the shadow of the sin of the first parents, and all (or almost all) humans commit actual sins during their life; thus, all die at least the death of psychosomatic disintegration. But Mary, according to Catholic teaching, by grace was preserved from all sin from the moment of her conception. Thus she ought to have been preserved from all the effects of sin, of which the chief is death.[46] This is why the theological dialogue

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approach. "It is precisely the nature of that nexus that will furnish the key to the settlement of the controversy .... All other issues may be considered 'side-issues' and will ultimately lead us back to the fundamental question which remains: what is the nature of the nexus between sin and death? And it stands to reason that since there is no agreement among theologians on this point, there can be no agreement either on the related question of Mary's death or immortality" (Juniper Carol, "The Immaculate Conception and Mary's Death," *Marian Reprints*, 27 [Dayton: University of Dayton Marian Library, 1954], 2).

[45] Rom 5:12–21; 6:16, 23; 7:5,13; 8:2; 1 Cor 15:56; Eph 2:1.

[46] "Mary's flesh, on the immortalist reading of the Assumption, always remains flesh since she does not die. She, as the living creature she is, is assumed whole into heaven. And this is most fundamentally because her sinlessness—her immaculate conception and her consequent freedom during the course of her earthly life from all particular sins—means that she is exempt from death, which is exactly the separation of soul from flesh so that the flesh becomes inanimate body and is then subject to decay and dispersal, therefore no longer available or responsive to other fleshly bodies" (Griffiths, *Decreation*, 156). Incidentally, precisely because many medieval theologians espoused the view that Mary was conceived in original sin and sanctified at some point after conception, the fact of her death was usually taken for granted. Striking, therefore, is this assertion found in Bonaventure's discussion of Mary's sanctification, given the truth of the Immaculate Conception: *si beata Virgo caruit originali peccato, caruit merito mortis. In III Sent*, d. 3, q. 2, sed contra. Since most Orthodox Christians resist the Catholic definition of the Immaculate Conception, they share this dilemma. "The problem for the Orthodox is the following: if Mary is free from original sin, how could she die?" (Emmanuel Lanne, "Marian Issues from an Eastern Perspective," *Studying Mary: Reflections on the Virgin Mary in Anglican and Roman Catholic Theology and Devotion*, eds. Adelbert Denaux and Nicholas Sagovsky [New York: T&T Clark, 2007], 65). Sergius Bulgakov claimed rather forcefully, "If this is how it was [Mary conceived without original sin], then the restoration of the *donum superadditum* to the Virgin Mary in the same measure as Adam possessed it before the fall, i.e., liberation from original sin, would unavoidably have to mean liberation from the power of death as well .... The Dormition of the Mother of God is the obvious proof of the falsity of this whole

concerning the question of the Blessed Virgin's death really gained traction after the proclamation of her Immaculate Conception in 1854.[47] Obviously, those who do not hold that Mary was immune from sin will in turn not hold that she was immune from death by virtue of being immune from sin.

Objections and Responses

For those who affirm Mary's complete purity, her deserving of death due to any defect of her own is not a matter of discussion. "All theologians agree … that Mary was not subject to death as a penalty for sin."[48] Thus the question becomes: What would be the reason for her dying if not as a result of sin? There are several possible answers to this. One could say, with Aquinas, that all the members of the body of Christ must be conformed to the head. Christ, though having all grace of soul prior to his passion, nevertheless willed not to attain immortality save through the passion. So his members first receive grace in the soul,

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theological construction" (Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 72).

[47] "After the definition of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX in 1854 the question of whether or not Our Blessed Lady died gradually became a subject of wide theological discussion and is today one of the most widely disputed Mariological questions. The impetus to further study out of which arose the present state of dispute was given by the writings of Dominic Arnaldi of Genoa who died in the year 1895. Arnaldi defended the thesis that Our Blessed Lady's complete freedom from sin demanded her freedom from the penalty of death" (Lawrence Everett, "Mary's Death and Bodily Assumption," *Mariology*, vol. 2, ed. Juniper B. Carol, O.F.M [Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co, 1957], 465).

[48] Ibid., 466. Schillebeeckx agrees: "That Mary should have died as a punishment is, of course, out of the question" (Edward Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, trans. by N.D. Smith [New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964], 74). Scheeben went one step further: "Neither can it be said that she was subject to death because of her mortal nature; for nature makes death inevitable only in so far as the person to whom it belongs has no supernatural claim to the eternal continuation of that nature" (Matthias Scheeben, *Mariology,* vol. 2, trans. by T. L. M. J. Geukers [St. Louis: B. Herder, 1948], 152). He immediately goes on to say, however, that she only would have a right to this claim if the economy of redemption did not require her death; and he thinks it does. Prior to 1854, of course, there was less dogmatic clarity on the issue of Mary's relation to sin, and the question of her immortality could hardly have been pursued without such clarity. In 1567, Pope Pius V rejected the claim of Michel de Bay that Mary died as a result of her contracting original sin in *Ex omnibus afflictionibus*, but it would take a positive definition of faith rather than a rejection of false opinion to force theologians to consider the reason for her death.

through the sacraments; their bodies are not glorified with immortality until they have been conformed to the death of Christ through their own dying.[49] Aquinas cites Romans 8:17 in this regard: "and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—*if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*."[50]

In response to this, I would point out that conformity to Christ does not necessarily have to be mimetic. That is, it is possible to speak of a participation in the suffering and death of Christ that does not involve a person undergoing the same physical and psychological torments that Christ experienced.[51] Many monastic traditions, for example, view the voluntary cutting off (mortification) of the passions of the flesh as the primary meaning of "dying with Christ." And in fact, the "dying with Christ" motif found in the Pauline corpus and elsewhere in the New Testament never refers to the death in the sense of the actual separation of body and soul. It refers to identification with Christ's death in baptism, persecution suffered for the sake of the faith, the subjugation of the body to the enlightened soul, or ideas similar to these. In her sinlessness, surely Mary "died with Christ" in these ways. Yet she also shared in her Son's suffering, as his mother, in way that no one else could. Her perfect maternal love means that she has perfect compassion, in the strongest sense of that word. Therefore, even if it was given to Mary to endure a

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[49] *Summa Theologiae* (=*ST*) III, q. 49, a. 3, ad 3. Aquinas does not actually mention Mary here, but she is implicitly included among the members of the body, all of whom must be conformed to the head. He does address Mary's death in the *Summa*, although in a somewhat oblique manner, in his consideration of her sanctification (*ST* III, q. 27). She was sanctified from original sin *in utero* as regards the personal stain, but she was not freed from the penalty to which the whole human nature is subject (a. 1, ad 3). Personal sanctification, which only pertains to the mind or soul, is what is available in the present life. Sanctification of the whole human nature, body and soul, will only happen in the resurrection (a. 2, ad 4). Just as Christ assumed mortality and other corporeal defects, though free of sin himself, so Mary was freed from sin without being freed from death and other bodily defects (a. 3, ad 1).

[50] Italics mine.

[51] In stronger terms, it is *impossible* for anyone to experience exactly what Christ experienced in his passion. As it applies to Mary: "Actually, Christ died in the midst of the most bitter physical, mental, and moral sufferings, while Mary's death is usually depicted as some sort of sleep and loving slumber. Rather than being similar to the death of Christ such a death presents a striking contrast and fails to verify the very *ratio* for which it is alleged, i.e., assimilation to her Son's death" (Farrell, "The Immortality of the Blessed Virgin Mary," 600).

cruel martyrdom, as with the Apostles, no pain could compare to the pain of standing at the foot of her child's cross; there her own heart was pierced, and no other suffering on her part would conform her more perfectly to Christ's suffering than this.[52] In addition to all this, there is the question of the second coming of Christ, at which Paul appears to suggest some of the faithful will be living and thus will not undergo death in the usual sense.[53] Could not the Blessed Virgin, having already endured her own passion, be transformed from mortal to immortal without her experiencing a real separation of soul and body?[54]

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[52] "As she saw her own lamb being dragged to slaughter / Mary, the ewe-lamb, worn out with grief followed" (Romanos the Melodist "On the Lament of the Mother of God," in *On the Life of Christ*, trans. Ephrem Lash [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995], 143). The most poignant laments are found in the Holy Friday compline service of the Eastern rite:

> The pure Virgin Mother wept as she took Him on her knees; her tears flowed down upon Him, and with bitter cries of grief she kissed Him. 'My Son, my Lord and God, Thou wast the only hope of Thine handmaiden, my life and the light of mine eyes; and now, alas, I have lost Thee, my sweet and most beloved Child. Woe is me! Anguish and affliction and sighing have taken hold of me,' cried the pure Virgin, bitterly lamenting, 'for I see Thee, my beloved Child, stripped, broken, anointed for burial, a corpse .... In my arms I hold Thee as a corpse, O loving Lord, who has brought the dead to life; grievously is my heart wounded and I long to die with Thee,' said the All-Pure, 'for I cannot bear to look upon Thee lifeless and without breath.'

The Lenten Triodion, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 618–9. In Maximus's biography of Mary, it is at the foot of the cross that "the good and most blessed mother received the new and perpetual *immortality*" (*The Life of the Virgin by Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Stephen J. Shoemaker [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012], 112, italics mine).

[53] 1 Cor 15:51; 1 Thess 4:17. Andrew of Crete, in one of his homilies delivered for the Dormition feast, even in the midst of trying to emphasize that Mary herself did not escape the laws of nature, admits that "there are indeed some, in fact, who will not escape it [death]; but 'they shall be changed,' according to divine revelation" (*On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, trans. Brian Daley, S.J. [Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1998], 118).

[54] If we go by the testimony of the earliest hagiographical accounts of the end of Mary's life, it is very much like an anticipation of the second coming of Christ. He appears, calls for his Mother to come to him, and she ascends in the wholeness of her person to his side in heavenly glory. If this is a valid way of looking at it, then Mary would represent

Along lines similar to the first objection, one could say that Mary, like her son, was not bound to die but submitted to death by an act of her will, either out of her own desire to share in the suffering of Christ or as a result of the strength of her affection.[55] This is one track Matthias Scheeben took: "According to a genuinely theological and universal opinion dating from the Middle Ages, the nature of Mary's death resembles that of Christ in this, that Mary voluntarily accepted the unmerited death out of humble and loving obedience and without doubt actually died of love."[56] The problem with this is that the conditions for its being true are unacceptable. In the case of Christ, his death was voluntary in the sense that he left himself at the mercy of the mob; this was something Christ himself makes clear he could have avoided if he wished, and in the end he "gave up his spirit" as an act of the will. The fact of the Incarnation in itself did not subject Christ to mortality, due to the Word's life-giving power being communicated to his flesh through the union of divinity and humanity. He willed to let himself be killed in order to bring about the redemption of humanity through his passion and resurrection. In Mary's case, however, there is no evidence to ground the claim she was killed. Therefore, if she was not subject to death by virtue of her freedom from sin, and if she was not killed by an external force, one would have to assert that a higher power was the cause of her death. This is because it does not lie within the power of the human will, by that power alone, to separate body and soul. Just as it does not lie within human power alone to join body and soul.[57] Of course a human

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the pilgrim Church at Christ's coming, the members of which will undergo their transformation into glory without the disintegration of their psychosomatic unity.

[55] Christ did not *contract* death and other defects or weaknesses because the humanity he received from Mary was without sin, says Aquinas; rather, he *assumed* them (*ST* III, q. 14, a. 3).

[56] Matthias Scheeben, *Mariology,* vol. 2, 153. Scheeben actually echoes a thought going back at least to St. Francis de Sales. See his *Treatise on the Love of God* 7.13.

[57] In the apt words of Cyril of Alexandria, "It does not pertain to any one of us, nor to any common man, to have the authority to lay down his life" (Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin [Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1995], 127). Thomas Aquinas also addresses this in his commentary on Christ's admission of the voluntary nature of his death and resurrection: "Now nature is not subject to the will of any mere human, since nature, as well as the will, are from God. Therefore, the death of any mere human person must be natural .... Thus, according to the pleasure of his will, [Christ] could lay down his life when he willed, and he could take it up again; no mere human being can do this, although he could voluntarily use some

can will to cause death, and when this is actualized in reference to oneself it is called suicide. It is clearly unacceptable to ascribe this to the Blessed Virgin,[58] but it is also quite problematic to hold that her death was purely an act of the divine will. Death, along with sin and the devil, has always been considered an enemy of God and the very thing from which God means to deliver us. Death is an evil, through which or in spite of which God can bring good, but of which God cannot be the cause.

One could respond that death is only an evil inasmuch as it is related to sin, and since Mary's death came about through love as opposed to sin, her death should not be considered an evil and thus God could be the cause. This is not satisfactory, however, for two reasons. First, because the reason for her dying would still be dependent on the death of Jesus, which *is* inextricably related to sin. Second, even if we concede that her death was not related to sin in any way, it would still involve the disintegration of her humanity for however brief a period of time. And if we accept the definition of evil as the absence of a good where that good ought to be present, then the separation of a human body and soul is always an evil, whatever be its perceived cause.[59]

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instrument to kill himself" (*In Ioan.* X, lec. 4, 1425; *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 9–21*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P. [Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013], 53). See also the comments of White, who confirms Aquinas's thought: "*Just* because this man is God and only because he is, he can also *as man* decide freely whether he wishes to be subject to the vicissitudes of human suffering and embrace the passion. It is in this sense that Christ, as the God-man, gives himself freely over to death in a way that no one else could" (Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* [Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2015], 358). In contrast, Germanus of Constantinople took Christ's words on the cross and applied them to Mary's passing: "She lay back on the pallet which she herself arranged, composed her immaculate body as she wished, and gave up her spirit as if she were falling asleep" (*On the Dormition of Mary*, trans. Daley, 175).

[58] I disagree with Griffiths that this is what Newman was actually claiming when he said that Mary's soul killed her body in order to reach Christ. See Griffiths, "Did Mary Die?" 395.

[59] Ultimately, I do not want to throw out the idea that the strength of Mary's love is what caused her soul to leave her body. In the last section of this essay, I try to show that it can be completely appropriated into an understanding of her death as an ecstatic experience, and that this most assuredly is a result of the reciprocal love between her and her Son.

Another objection that has been raised is that Mary would seem to be greater than her Son, the disciple greater than her master, if she avoided death.[60] But quite the opposite can be the case, especially in light of what has already been said about her co-suffering at the crucifixion, where Mary experienced something worse than her own death. Mary's immortality would only make her superior to her Son if he was bound to die and she was not. But in reality, Christ was *not* bound to die (by anything other than his perfectly free divine and human wills), and Mary *would have* been subject to death if not for the work of grace. If Christ *willed* to give his own life in order to save his mother from a certain death, this makes her greater than him no more than a drowning man is superior to the one who dies in the act of rescuing him. Where grace abounds, glory and honor abound for the one who gives. The one who receives grace may also receive honor, as indeed Mary does, but never a greater honor than the source of grace. Scheeben adds another element to this objection, in a passage that is otherwise rather strongly bent toward the immortalist position.

> By reason of her freedom from original sin, Mary was in fact not subject to death as a penal debt, and consequently she was exempted from this law binding on the rest of mankind. Neither can it be said that she was subject to death because of her mortal nature; for nature makes death inevitable only in so far as the person to whom it belongs has no supernatural claim to the eternal continuation of that nature. Now, such a claim could certainly be based on the grace of the divine motherhood, if Mary had not specifically become thereby the Mother of the Redeemer, and if, in the economy of redemption, the death of the Redeemer did not require her death: not indeed as a second expiatory death, but in order that thus the Mother should not appear greater than the Son*, and especially that by her death she might*

[60] Pope St. John Paul II states this explicitly: "The Mother is not superior to the Son who underwent death" (address to a general audience, June 25, 1997. https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1997/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_25061997.html. Accessed February 23, 2018).

> *prove the reality of her own human nature and that of her Son*.[61]

The difficulty here is that this line of thought aims to prove what something is by means of something alien to the essence of that thing. While death certainly reveals one's status as a descendant of the first humans, and while mortality is a characteristic of all embodied living creatures considered in themselves, it is foreign to the Christian vision of what it means to be human considered in the light of divine revelation. Mortality is a condition to which humanity *became* subject, by way of defect and not by way of its created condition.[62] The constitution of humanity admits the possibility of death, but it does not require it.[63] So Scheeben is right to say that death proves a being not to be divine, but it would be wrong to conclude that immortality proves a being not to be human. What the immortality of a human person would prove is that such a person has received the fullness of divine grace.

Most of what I have considered so far stems from the perceived connections between sin and death. There is at least one factor pertaining to Mary's immortality, however, that is not based on this connection. It stems from the relation between the bodies of Christ and Mary.[64] Since the idea was brought to clarity in the early fifth century, it has been a standard of orthodox Christology to hold that the union between divinity and humanity in the one person of the Son of God entails some kind of sharing of properties between the two natures. Specifically with regard to Christ's body, this was used to demonstrate how the sacramental body of Christ is effective for those who receive it. The divine Word communicates his life-giving properties to the flesh with which it is united, making that flesh life-giving; this property is then

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[61] Matthias Scheeben, *Mariology,* vol. 2, 152.

[62] I think of Augustine on this point: "Non enim eo modo, quo angelos, condiderat Deus homines, ut etiam si peccassent mori omnino non possent; sed ita ut perfunctos oboedientiae munere sine interventu mortis angelica immortalitas et beata aeternitas sequeretur" (*De Civ.* XIII.1; CCSL 48, 385).

[63] *ST* III, q. 14, a. 3, ad 2. What Aquinas calls the "remote" cause of death is the fact that humans are composed of contraries. "Sed haec causa impediebatur per originalem iustitiam. Et ideo proxima causa mortis et aliorum defectuum est peccatum, per quod est subtracta originalis iustitia."

[64] This does pertain indirectly to Mary's sinlessness, in that she was preserved from sin in order to become the Mother of God. But the effects of the union between her body and her Son's body is not directly related to the sin/death nexus.

communicated in a real but less perfect way to those who partake of it. It becomes, in the words of Ignatius of Antioch, the medicine of immortality.[65] No one, however, was more intimately united to the flesh of Christ than Mary, the one from whom he took his flesh. They literally shared body and blood for the period of gestation, the infant Jesus was nourished from Mary's body, and we can assume Mary shared in the Eucharist of the Church (out of desire, not necessity). In light of this, it must be asked, was the union of these two bodies such that the life-giving power of the Word was communicated to Mary's flesh? If the flesh of Christ is the medicine of immortality, what of the spotless flesh from which his was both derived and nourished? St. Andrew of Crete seems to hint at a sort of *communicatio idiomatum* between Christ and Mary in one of his Dormition homilies: "The body of the Mother of God, then, is a source of life [for us], because it received into itself the whole life-giving fulness of the Godhead."[66]

Evidence from St. Thomas for Mary's Immortality

Thomas Aquinas presumed that the Blessed Virgin died because she contracted original sin.[67] He presumed she was conceived in original sin because he thought there had to be something of which she needed to be cleansed; if she was not in need of sanctification, then Christ is not the savior of all. And he presumed that her sanctification from original sin occurred sometime between conception and birth because he presumed that the infusion of the soul occurred sometime after conception.[68] This makes Aquinas an unlikely ally in the case for the immortality of Mary, but there are a number of ways in which he brings light to the issue.[69] The most obvious is simply the fact that the first presumption was deemed false with the promulgation of *Ineffabilis Deus*, and therefore his conclusion—that she died—can no longer be supported by that presumption. This is valuable because in his Christology Aquinas is very clear that Jesus was free from the necessity of dying precisely because he did not contract original sin, just as Thomas is clear that Mary did

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[65] Ignatius of Antioch, *Eph.* 20.

[66] *On the Dormition of Mary*, trans. Daley, 132.

[67] *ST* III, q. 14, a. 3, ad 1.

[68] *ST* III, q. 27, a. 2.

[69] Liam Walsh makes a similar claim about Aquinas aiding our understanding of the Immaculate Conception in "Thomas Aquinas, the Doctrine of Original Sin, and the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception," *Studying Mary*, 125.

contract the penalties of sin through her being conceived in original sin.[70] Following Aquinas, then, we should at least be able to end up in the position of many modern Catholic theologians: Mary died, but she was not bound to die. By Aquinas's own words, however, it almost appears unquestionable that he would have to admit Mary's immortality if he conceded that she never contracted original sin: "the faithful are now delivered by baptism from the penalty of actual sins, and from the penalty of original sin as to the exclusion from glory, yet still remain bound by the penalty of original sin as to the necessity of dying in the body because they are renewed in the spirit, but not yet in the flesh."[71]

The primary reason Christ assumed the defects caused by sin in his humanity was to be able to make satisfaction for the sins of humanity, death being the chief punishment for those sins.[72] Christ's death was economical; he voluntarily submitted himself to death for the sake of his mission. And the scope of the satisfaction Christ made was beyond anything a human person could provide: "Now a mere man could not have satisfied for the whole human race, and God was not bound to satisfy; hence it behooved Jesus Christ to be both God and man."[73] I bring this forward in order to put more pressure on the same question asked before: What would be the reason for Mary's death, if she was free from its necessity? If the economy of salvation required the death of the

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[70] *ST* III, q. 14, a. 3, resp.

[71] *ST* III, q. 52, a. 5, ad 2; *Summa Theologiae, Tertia Pars, 1*–59, trans. Laurence Shapcote, eds. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 561; All subsequent references to English translations are from this edition. See also *ST* III, q. 27, a. 3, resp.: "And though, through faith in Christ, some were freed from that condemnation, according to the spirit, before Christ's Incarnation, yet it does not seem fitting that any one should be freed from that condemnation, according to the flesh, except after His Incarnation, for it was then that immunity from condemnation was first to appear. Consequently, just as before the immortality of the flesh of Christ rising again, none obtained immortality of the flesh, so it seems unfitting to say that before Christ appeared in sinless flesh, His Virgin Mother's or anyone else's flesh should be without the fomes."

[72] *ST* III, q. 14, a. 1, resp.

[73] *ST* III, q. 1, a. 2, resp. "Homo autem purus satisfacere non poterat pro toto humano genere; Deus autem satisfacere non debebat; unde oportebat Deum et hominem esse Iesum Christum."

God-man, is there an economical *ratio* for Mary's actual death, besides those addressed in the previous section?[74]

A third important element to take into account from Aquinas is the order of events, specifically the fact that the kingdom of heaven was opened by Christ's Passion before Mary's Dormition and Assumption. Human presence in heaven was barred because of twofold sin, original and personal. Christ both paid the punishment for original sin for all and provided for participation in his Passion so that personal sin could be removed as well, thus removing the barrier that was in place since the fall.[75] This opening of the gates of heaven, marked by the ascension of the Son in his full humanity, is what makes it possible to understand the Dormition of Mary, an event which absolutely cannot be ignored but has typically been taken to mean her real but peaceful death, as a *deathless* transition into heavenly life. Prior to the redeeming work of Christ in history, even if the possibility of immortality were granted, it was impossible for any human person to enter the kingdom of heaven.[76] We could perhaps say that by grace at her conception the subjective barrier

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[74] Fr. Carol answered "yes" to this question based on Mary's role as Co-redeemer, but offered no explanation of the immediate *cause* of her death: "At any rate, if it is ever conclusively established that the Immaculate Conception did confer on Our Lady the right to immortality, then it seems that the only plausible explanation of her actual death would be her mission as Coredemptrix of the human race." Juniper Carol, "The Immaculate Conception and Mary's Death," 7.

[75] *ST* III, q. 49, a. 5, resp.

[76] Aquinas concedes that Enoch and Elijah were granted some kind of immortality but are hidden in a terrestrial paradise until the end of history. They were not admitted into the paradise of heaven (*ST* III, q. 49, a. 5, ad 2). In the *Ordinatio* of Duns Scotus, he applies this same principle to Mary in the famous article addressing whether or not she could have been conceived without original sin. In contrast to his disagreement with Aquinas on that question, here they are in agreement: "For thus God determined that although he had accepted the foreseen passion of Christ to remit original sin of all who believed and would believe in that passion, nevertheless he only remitted the punishment due to that sin—but without the vision—for the sake of the passion he foresaw, since it was exhibited as present; and therefore just as to those fathers the door was not open until the passion of Christ was exhibited, so it is probable that neither was it opened to the blessed Virgin" (*Four Questions on Mary by John Duns Scotus*, trans. Allan Wolter, O.F.M. [Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2000], 53; *Ordinatio* III, dist. 3, ad auct, ad secundum rationem). Since the Passion made beatific vision possible, and since Mary did not die before the Passion, is it not possible that her being granted the vision of God could have caused the immortalization of her whole self?

to immortality was removed for Mary, and the objective barrier was then taken away by Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension. This ordering of events also fits well with Aquinas's conception of how Mary grows in grace while always having the fullness of grace since her sanctification *in utero*. He observes that there is a progressive aspect to the completeness of the grace she received: first the perfection of disposition (received before she was born), then the perfection of form (received when Christ was conceived), and lastly a teleological perfection (received when she entered glory).[77] Taking her Immaculate Conception for granted, it seems that the first perfection was granted to her in anticipation of Christ's redeeming work, but her final perfection could only take place *after* Christ had first established heaven as a place humans could dwell. In other words, Mary could not have been granted entrance into the kingdom of heaven in anticipation of Christ's entrance in the way that she was preserved from original sin through anticipation of his Passion.

There is at least one more aspect of Thomas's thought that proves helpful in contemplating the possible immortality of the Virgin. It relies somewhat on what I have to say in the final section, but I will mention it here in expectation of that discussion. Aquinas accepts the principle (which, at least in the *Summa*, comes from Augustine) that the relation between soul and body is such that the perfection of the former causes the perfection of the latter. In response to the objection that Christ had no bodily defect due to the beatification of his soul, he admits that corporal glorification is the natural outcome of the soul's glory. Then he qualifies this law in the case of Christ: "Yet this natural relationship in Christ was subject to the will of His Godhead, and thereby it came to pass that the beatitude remained in the soul, and did not flow into the body; but the flesh suffered what belongs to a passible nature."[78] Closely akin to the way Aquinas says Christ's humanity was not necessarily mortal but that he assumed mortality, here he says that Christ willed to prevent the glorification of his body that would have been the natural consequence of his human soul enjoying the beatific vision. In a sermon on the angelic salutation to Mary he uses the same principle, arguing that her body was

[77] *ST* III, q. 27, a. 5, ad 1–2.
[78] *ST* III, q. 14, a. 1, ad 2.

made fit to conceive the Savior through the overflow of the grace her soul received.[79]

Now, while very few theologians have posited that Mary enjoyed the vision of God while on earth, there is great mystery surrounding the moment of her "falling asleep." It seems to me that if we combine what we know about Mary's purity of heart, her knowledge and love of God, and the extent of the grace she received with the hagiographic and iconographic depictions of her Dormition, then there may be good reason to understand that event as the moment the glory of her enraptured soul causes the glorification of her body, in accordance with the principle acknowledged by Aquinas.[80] If Mary came to enjoy the vision of God in her final moments on earth, then it is possible her body would have thereby become incorruptible and thus unable to die. That her body was incorruptible *post mortem* is basically universally confessed by both Catholic and Orthodox tradition, so this would only amend that confession to include *pre mortem* incorruption. Her Dormition then becomes not a true death but a death-like state, due to the fact that her body would no longer need to be sustained in the way that mortal bodies do: by breathing, eating, etc.[81] Aquinas already makes room for the possibility of humans *in statu viae* experiencing beatific vision, as seen in his treatment of Paul's rapture.[82] He sees it as likely that Paul saw the divine essence, but distinguishes between Paul's transitory vision and the permanent vision of the saints in order to explain why Paul was glorified body and soul as a consequence of his experience.[83] With Mary then, it is not a question of whether she could have had such a vision but of whether she could have come to enjoy it in an abiding manner without undergoing death.

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[79] *Expositio salutationis angelicae*, a. 1 (*www.corpusthomisticum.org*; accessed Feb. 16, 2018).

[80] It is not angels but Christ himself who appears in order to bring his Mother with him to heaven, and she is always depicted as seeing him in all his glory when he comes for her.

[81] On resurrected persons, Aquinas writes: "Therefore, after mortality is done away with in those who have risen, the means serving the condition of mortal life must cease to have any function." *Light of Faith: The Compendium of Theology*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1993 reprint), 177; *Compendium Theologiae* ch. 156.

[82] *ST* II-II, q. 175, aa. 3–6.

[83] *ST* II-II, q. 175, a. 3, ad. 2–3.

Biblical Considerations

My search for treatments of Mary based on the witness of Scripture revealed two vastly different perspectives. On the one hand is the opinion that on the question of Mary's death, "evidence from Sacred Scripture does not exist."[84] On the other hand is the position that "all exegesis is related to Mary," because all Scripture refers to Christ and the Church.[85] If there is some truth in the latter view, and I think there is, then it would not be unreasonable to look to the Bible for guidance in the matter of Mary's possible immortality, as has been the case with other Marian doctrines.[86] The key to finding such guidance is to take a typological approach, which, unpalatable as it may be according to modern hermeneutics, has more than enough footing in the Christian tradition to justify its use. In applying this mode of reading, I take assurance especially from the precedent in tradition, but I also take some inspiration from the recent work of Matthew Levering on the Scriptural basis for the dogma of Mary's Assumption.[87] Since Protestant rejections of Marian doctrines typically revolve around the lack of biblical support for such doctrines, Levering makes the effort to defend the legitimacy of typological reading by way of conversation with three Protestant Bible scholars.[88] My observations in the following paragraphs should not be taken as an attempt to provide proof from Scripture. I intend to reach the much lesser goal of showing that there are elements which point toward the idea of Mary's immortality, if one accepts this manner of reading.

Several typological portraits of Mary have been recognized in the Scriptures throughout Christian history. The ideas with the strongest

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[84] Michael O'Carroll, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1982), 117.

[85] Troy Stefano, "Catholica Mater: The Marian Insights of Henri de Lubac," in *Mary on the Eve of the Second Vatican Council*, 180. This is de Lubac's opinion, in Stefano's reading.

[86] See, for example: Adelbert Denaux, "The scriptural basis of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Mother of God," in *Studying Mary*, 24–35.

[87] Matthew Levering, *Mary's Bodily Assumption* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2015).

[88] Peter Enns, Richard Hays, and Peter Leithart. Since I am merely making typological observations here and not arguing for the validity of such an approach, I am indebted to Levering for paving a way by which at least some Protestants might join in this discussion.

pedigree, so to speak, are those which sense a threefold connection between Eve, Mary, and the Church. Justin Martyr and Irenaeus famously compare Mary to Eve, as contributing to the redemption of humanity through her faith and obedience in contrast to Eve's unbelief and disobedience. And there developed a common reading in the age of the Church Fathers and Mothers that the Church was born from the side of the crucified Christ, as Eve came forth from Adam. Because there is such a close relation between Mary and the Church, a biblical account of her immortality naturally brings the immortality of the Church into view. My proposal attempts to give weight to the credibility of Mary's immortality, but some of the same arguments apply just as well to the immortality of the Church, though the latter issue is less contested. Since my purpose here is not to argue *that* there is good reason to hold to the Eve–Mary connection, I begin by assuming this relation.

To arrive at the conclusion that I have already made known based on the account of the creation of Adam and Eve, we have to imagine a situation counterfactual to what is actually recorded in the text. In Gen 2:18–25, the man is created first, placed in the garden of Eden, and given a mission as well as a command. The Creator then makes the proclamation that the man is lacking something by not having a partner. God forms and brings before the man many kinds of creatures, none of which appear as suitable companions. "So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man," who immediately recognizes the woman as his own kind.[89] The next event that is narrated, without any indication as to the amount of time that has elapsed, is the woman's encounter with the serpent. It is important that the woman's dialogue with the serpent revolves around the issue of death and immortality. First, the woman relates to the serpent God's word that death would be the result of their disobedience, and this is followed by the serpent's denial of the same: "You will not die."[90] The woman is deceived, eats from the forbidden tree, and as a result of this act mortality comes to be a defining feature of humanity. Had the man

[89] Gen 2:21–22.
[90] Gen 3:4.

and the woman remained unmoving in their obedience to the divine will, immortality would have been their lot.

Notice, however, that the creation of the woman—her being brought forth from the side of the sleeping man—occurs *before* the fall. This is significant in light of the fact that since at least the early third century, as mentioned above, Christians have seen the sleep of the first Adam as a figure of the death of the second Adam and the creation of the first woman as the creation of the Church. In his treatise on the soul, Tertullian plainly states: "If Adam is a type of Christ, then Adam's sleep is a symbol of the death of Christ, and by the wound in the side of Christ was typified the Church, the true Mother of all the living."[91] This means that even in his pristine state, the first man still had to undergo a symbolic death in order to bring about the first woman, yet there is no indication that the woman would have been subject to the same experience. Had there been no fall, both Adam and Eve would not have been subject to true death, yet Eve alone would not have even tasted death in the figurative sense. Looking forward to the realities which are figured in Genesis 2, if it has already been accepted that Mary fulfills Eve's role through her faith and her obedience, why should we not think that the Immaculate Virgin then received what would have been Eve's reward—immortality—had she remained without sin? This is corroborated by common belief about the Church. Once she comes forth as the body of Christ from the body of Christ, she is established for all eternity, because the one who is both her head and immoveable foundation has already conquered death and ascended into heaven. "I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it," promised Jesus.[92]

There is additional support for Mary's immortality in Scripture that is not strictly typological, which may be more satisfying to some, although I

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[91] *Tertullian: Apologetical Works & Minucius Felix Octavius*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, Fathers of the Church 10 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 277. Si enim Adam de Christo figuram dabat, somnus Adae mors erat Christi dormituri in mortem, ut de iniuria perinde lateris eius vera mater viventium figuraretur ecclesia (*De anima* 43.10). One of Karl Rahner's earliest works, *E latere Christi*, traces the early development of this idea and concludes that it is reasonable to believe it originated in the apostolic era. (*Spiritualität und Theologie der Kirchenväter, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3 [Freiburg: Herder, 1999], 57).

[92] Mt 16:18.

believe it does not carry as much weight. The woman in Revelation 12 has long been identified as both Mary and/or the Church, among other referents, with the child she bears being either Christ himself or the members of his body.[93] Putting aside the possible connection with the ark of the covenant that appears in the heavenly temple at the end of the preceding chapter, Revelation 12 begins with "a great sign" appearing in heaven, that of a celestial woman preparing to give birth. Next comes the vision of a dragon poised to consume the woman's child. "And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne."[94] Immediately following this, the woman finds refuge in the desert ('wilderness' in most translations), "where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days."[95] This the first of two accounts in this chapter where the woman finds refuge in this divinely appointed place. The next comes after a brief description of Satan's being cast to the earth and an announcement of the victory of Christ and his faithful over the devil.

> So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her

[93] Balthasar thinks it impossible that the author did *not* have Mary in mind: "It is unthinkable that a Christian writer at the end of the first century, using the image of Zion in labor and giving birth to the person of the Messiah, should not have had in mind the physical Mother of Jesus, particularly if he was close to the compiler of the Fourth Gospel." Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama III*, 335.

[94] Rev 12:5.

[95] Rev 12:6.

> children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.[96]

This whole vision can obviously be taken any number of ways, but at a sort of base level what is depicted is the dragon's desire to destroy the woman, who is preserved by divine power from its rage. She is not explicitly mentioned again after this.

The woman's being protected from the dragon in itself points to her escaping death, and her preservation is all the more striking against the backdrop of the rest of the book, wherein the faithful more often than not are specifically given over to evil forces. They are not spared death but overcome evil through their willingness to suffer and die for the good. The woman's preservation is easily understandable if we take her to be Zion, the heavenly city. The Messiah proceeds from her, she begets children on earth who will one day be her eternal citizens, but she herself remains in the heavenly realm until the old creation is transformed into the new. Only then does she descend as the bride of the Lamb.[97] But when we contemplate the woman as the Virgin Mary, it seems almost unavoidable to take her escaping the dragon (not only once, but three times) as her being preserved from death. That this is a work of grace is made clear: her hiding place was prepared for her by God, she was given wings to reach it, and the earth swallows the floodwaters meant to drown her. On its own, of course, this episode does not reveal that the woman was saved from the clutches of death indefinitely. It gestures in this direction, and it certainly leaves open the possibility.[98]

On a final note, there is a loose but interesting connection between Revelation 12 and Leviticus 16 which lends further support to Mary's immortality. The woman in the Apocalypse avoids the dragon by going into the wilderness, where God has made a place for her. The child she has just birthed is "snatched up" to the throne of God. Between the two accounts of her going to her place in the wilderness, there is the scene of the great angelic battle which ends in Satan being cast to the earth. Then comes a chorus of praise from the heavens, in which it is proclaimed that

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[96] Rev 12:13–17.

[97] Rev 21:2.

[98] On this, Epiphanius of Salamis writes: "Perhaps this can be applied to her [Mary]; I cannot decide for certain, and I am not saying that she remained immortal. But neither am I saying that she died." (*The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, trans. Frank Williams [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 609.)

the saints overcame their accuser by the blood of the Lamb. If we identify the woman's child with the Lamb, then the picture emerges of the woman's being kept safe from the dragon while her child reaches heaven only after letting himself be led "like a lamb to the slaughter."[99] The woman avoids death; the child endures death in order to overcome it. The parallel in Leviticus 16 is the two goats that together remove and make atonement for the sin of Israel. One must be slaughtered as a sin offering; the other bears the sins but gets to live; it is led out into the wilderness and there set free.[100]

The relation between the day of atonement and the work of Christ has long been the subject of discussion. Some have seen in the two goats the dual natures of Christ, while others have seen Christ only in the animal that is killed, and there have been numerous other interpretations. The primary theological objections, I imagine, to my suggestion of reading Mary as the animal that is spared would be either that this puts too much weight on her role in the redeeming work of Christ (because he alone is the one that bore the sins of the world) or that it risks diminishing the honor due to Mary (since the scapegoat has also long been seen in a negative light, especially in Jewish literature but also in Origen, for example). In response to the first, there is ample reason, attested to in the tradition of Marian reflection, to consider the Blessed Mother as bearing sin in a way analogous to the way Christ bore the sin of the world. Even if one hesitates to honor her with the titles 'Mediatrix' or 'Co-redemptrix,' she is still one who in her own complete purity had to give her innocent Son as a sin offering, participating in the economy of salvation by offering the one who offers himself.[101] At the very least we

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[99] Is 53:7.

[100] Radner points out that the medieval *Glossa ordinaria* on Leviticus 16 notes that "the desert goes so far as to reach the 'bosom of the Father'" (Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 168). In contrast to the wilderness being a place of death, one thinks of the promises God makes in Isaiah to turn the desert into the very place where we meet God: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for God" (Is 40:3). To complete the parallel: the beloved disciple of Jesus was the one chosen, at the cross, to lead Mary into her desert.

[101] "After this manner the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting

must say that she had to bear the sins of the people inasmuch as she had to bear the suffering of her dear Son, although this maternal compassion is amplified in her by virtue the strength of her love.[102] Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Sulpicians, sees Mary as becoming—at the cross—the mother of sinners and thus "feeling herself charged with their sins and obliged to satisfy for their crimes," which she does through offering her Son.[103] This actually makes the Marian aspect of Leviticus 16 even more pronounced, if Mary is viewed as representing Israel (not merely figuring Israel, but actually being the representative of the chosen nation), the one who brings the Messiah into the world. The second objection really only applies if the scapegoat or 'Azazel' is decidedly negative in its connotations, but most commentator's highlight the uncertainty attached to 'Azazel.' The Christian exegetical tradition leans heavily toward a positive reading.

Historical Considerations

It is a bit misleading to present the content of this section under the heading "historical." There is scant historical evidence of any sort related to the life of the Virgin, either textual or material. What Pope Benedict XVI said about the Assumption would apply to the question of Mary's avoiding death as well. "So it is clear that the point at issue cannot be historical tradition of an historical fact; the affirmation [of the Assumption] is misunderstood if it is considered or presented as such …. In this way it [the Bull of 1950] clearly defines the content of the article of faith as a theological, not an historical, affirmation."[104] What stands out in the

herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth." *Lumen Gentium* §58.

[102] As I said in a previous section, since the Mother of God has perfect maternal love, the suffering of her child causes her to suffer to a greater degree than any harm that might come to herself. This is why, if indeed she was preserved from death, this preservation does no damage to the fact that all the members of Christ must be conformed to his suffering. For Christ's mother, *his* suffering simply is her suffering and thus her being conformed to it.

[103] Jean-Jacques Olier, *Vie intérieure de la Très-Sainte Vierge* (Paris: Librairie Poussielgue Frères, 1875), 221. This is referred to in Balthasar's *Theo-Drama III* (311). In a similar way, Modestus of Jerusalem presents Mary as cooperating in the atonement made by Christ: "he has decreed that he will take you as his partner, in order to provide forever a propitiatory sacrifice for all humanity, as you intercede for them." *On the Dormition of Mary*, trans. Daley, 97.

[104] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church's Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 72–3. This does not

tradition regarding the historicity of Mary, given the esteem which with she has been honored since a very early time, is the lack of objects connected with her, the lack of surety about geographical sites connected with her, and the "cultivated vagueness" with which the earliest legends of the end of her life are shrouded.[105] Because it has often been claimed that the constant witness of tradition is that Mary died, here I only aim to present some evidence to the contrary from some of the earlier sources.[106]

One of the most famous and oft quoted passages is from the *Panarion* of Epiphanius, probably written in the 370s. Apparently responding to two sects, one that treated Mary as divine and one that failed to give her proper honor, Epiphanius relates that there is no tradition regarding the end of her life, neither in Scripture nor in the memory of the Church. And he explicitly says the same about her mortality, refusing either to commit to or deny the fact that she died.[107] In most cases, admission of ignorance such as this is not a matter of great consequence. In this case, it is significant because by the time Epiphanius wrote it was already an established tradition in Christianity to honor the relics of illustrious members of the body of Christ (martyrs, for instance), and the practice of memorializing locations associated with Christ and his saints was beginning to more common as well. Combined with the honor we see given to the person of Christ's mother as early as

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mean that the Assumption is to be taken as a myth. It is taken as a real event in history, but it is proved through theological rather than historical sources.

[105] In the introduction to his translation of early Dormition homilies, Daley observes that such vagueness is one of the primary common features of those homilies. He goes on to say: "As I have mentioned, it is clear that from the late sixth century until the tenth ... virtually all treatments of the end of Mary's life accept the belief that she died, was buried, and was raised from the tomb to heavenly glory within a few days of her burial. Nevertheless, it is striking that the authors of these homilies, like the broad ecclesiastical tradition since their time, consistently avoided the language of death and resurrection in speaking of Mary's end" (*On the Dormition of Mary*, trans. Daley, 27).

[106] For a survey of these sources, see Walter Burghardt, "The Testimony of the Patristic Age Concerning Mary's Death," *Marian Studies* vol 8.1 (1957). For a thorough investigation, see Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Martin Jugie, *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge, étude historico-doctrinale* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944).

[107] *Panarion* 78.11; *Griechische christliche Schrifsteller*, Epiphanius 3.462. See also Daley's discussion of this in *On the Dormition of Mary*, 5–6.

the second century, it is somewhat remarkable that by the end of the fourth century there is no set tradition concerning the circumstances of her final days.[108] Add to this that there have never been official claims to either possession or knowledge of first-order type relics of Mary.

It was not until the late fifth century that a recognizable leap in Marian devotion took place and shortly thereafter when Dormition festal orations began to appear.[109] It is true that these homilies speak of Mary's death, but they do so with a great sense of mystery and sometimes even disbelief at the thought of the Mother of God's facing death. The reader comes away with the sense that the authors were perplexed about how to speak of her dying. To demonstrate this, I simply note such language from a variety of sources.

John of Thessalonica ends the opening words of his homily on the Dormition by stating rather plainly, "When some time had gone by, this glorious virgin, the Mother of God, left the earth by a natural death."[110] After this, however, leading up to his portrayal of her passing, he does not use the word "death," preferring instead to call it her "departure from the body." The reason why becomes clear in the words John puts in the apostle Peter's mouth when the latter delivers a speech to those who are gathered to bid farewell to Mary: "For the light of her lamp fills the world, and will not be quenched until the end of the ages, so that all who wish to be saved may take courage from her. Do not think, then, that Mary's death is death! It is not death, but eternal life."[111] When Christ comes for Mary as he promised her, she utters her final few words, then John writes, "And having said this, she brought the course of her life to its fulfillment, her face turned smilingly toward the Lord. And the Lord took her soul."[112] Demonstrating how un-deathlike this event was though, John then has the apparently inanimate body of the Virgin acting as if

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[108] Farrell, "The Immortality of Mary," 595: "The significance of Epiphanius' contribution to the present question is not which of the three hypotheses he personally held, but the fact that he knew of no apostolic tradition affirming that the Blessed Virgin died."

[109] The earliest Greek homilies are from around the early 600s. There are earlier texts in Syriac, such as the poetry of Jacob of Serug. Jacob mentions Mary's death, but he does not go into the level of detail that the Greek authors do. See Homily V in *On the Mother of God*, trans. Mary Hansbury (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1998), 89–100.

[110] *On the Dormition of Mary*, trans. Daley, 47.

[111] Ibid., 58.

[112] Ibid., 63.

animate: "the very body of the holy Mother of God cried out before everyone and said, 'Remember me, King of Glory! Remember me, that I am your creation; remember me, that I guarded the treasure entrusted me.'"[113]

Theoteknos of Livias, writing in the same period as John of Thessalonica, focuses more on the Mary's transference to heaven than on the actual moments surrounding her falling asleep. Like John, he admits her death, but immediately qualifies it. "And even though the God-bearing body of that holy one did taste death, it was not corrupted; for it was kept incorrupt and free of decay, and it was lifted up to heaven with her pure and spotless soul."[114] This comes after Theoteknos had already argued that, whatever happened to Mary, it was greater than what happened to Enoch, of whom Scripture speaks as avoiding death.

In the homily attributed to Modestus of Jerusalem, which is most likely not original, the author makes it known that his aim is to feed the minds of the faithful who want to know more about the mystery of the Dormition, since the sacred writings do not reveal anything relating to it. He consistently refers to the event as the falling-asleep of the Mother of God or the completion of her temporal life rather than her death. She receives unique privileges because of her unique relation to Christ. "The Mother of God has come to this true vine that she brought forth, to harvest the grapes of incorruption and immortality."[115] Like all the ancient accounts, Ps-Modestus has Christ coming to appear to Mary, but this account seems to present her seeing Jesus as the impetus of her soul leaving her body. "And that blessed one, gazing on him and deeply moved, as always, by the holy yearning of her divinely maternal heart, left her holy body behind and 'committed into his hands' her blessed, holy soul."[116] The author then expresses astonishment at the thought that "she who gave birth to the life and resurrection of the world" would fall asleep.[117]

From the early eighth century come several homilies on this theme by Andrew of Crete. St. Andrew clearly grapples with the tension he perceives in the fact of the Dormition between Mary abiding by but also

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[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid., 74.
[115] Ibid., 86.
[116] Ibid., 98.
[117] Ibid.

superseding in some way the laws of nature. And he is not ashamed to admit his perplexity. "I have tried to utter her praise in a funeral oration, though clouds cover her ascent from view, though a spiritual mist swirls around any logical explanation of her mystery and does not allow us to express clearly the understanding which the mystery conceals."[118] He wants to communicate that "she obeyed the laws of nature, and" therefore "reached the end of life."[119] But then he adds, "Consider, then, if there is any greater miracle on record than what has been accomplished so astonishingly in her. The law of nature has at least grown weak, and slowly falls away."[120] Andrew tries to resolve the tension by making the sleep of Adam, when Eve was formed from his side, analogous to Mary's Dormition.

> Indeed, if I must speak the truth, the death that is natural to the human race even reached as far as Mary: not that it held her captive as it holds us, or that it overcame her—far from it! But it touched her enough to let her experience that sleep that is for us, if I may put it this way, a kind of ecstatic movement towards the things we only hope for during this life, a passage that leads us on towards transformation into a state like that of God. Mary's death was, we might say, a parallel to that first sleep, which fell upon the first human being when his rib was removed to complete the creation of our race …. In the same way, I think, she fell into a natural sleep and tasted death.[121]

So even though he thinks it important to maintain that Mary died, that her soul and body were separated, Andrew also seems to want to make room for interpreting this "death" in a non-literal way.

Germanus of Constantinople adds to what we have seen so far that the Theotokos underwent death in order to prove the full humanity of her Son. Christ was "the son of a real mother who was subject to the laws of natural necessity …. [She] had a body just like one of us, and therefore

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[118] Ibid., 114.
[119] Ibid., 104.
[120] Ibid., 109.
[121] Ibid., 121. This is one of several sources which provide some corroboration from tradition for the proposal I put forward in the final section of this essay.

[she] could not escape the event of death that is the common destiny of all human beings."[122] Still, Germanus confined himself to what had by this time become the received tradition of the Church that Mary's body suffered no decay after death. And this makes her death decidedly unnatural, decay being the natural consequence of death. Germanus states that such a condition was impossible in Mary's case. "Since he who emptied himself into you was God from the beginning, and life eternal, the Mother of Life had to become a companion of life, had to experience death simply as falling-asleep."[123] He describes the moment of her Dormition in this way: "She lay back on the pallet which she had herself arranged, composed her immaculate body as she wished, and gave up her spirit as if she were falling asleep. Or I should say, she left her flesh behind while fully awake, departing from it in a way free of all corruption."[124]

The same reticence to call Mary's end plainly "death" is seen in John of Damascus. He does not see how the Virgin could have avoided something that Christ did not refuse, but what she experienced was so unlike death that the term "death" is not the best word to describe the event. "What, then, shall we call this mystery concerning you? Death? But even though your holy and blessed soul was separated from your privileged, immaculate body … still it did not remain in death, nor was it dissolved by corruption …. Therefore I will not call your holy passing a death, but rather a falling-asleep, a parting, or—more properly speaking—a homecoming."[125] She truly experienced death, but death's encounter with her made it something good instead of something destructive. "Blessedness was yours—not death!"[126]

Apart from these homiletic sources, similar language is present in the seventh-century *Life of the Virgin*. This is an important text, being the earliest complete biography of Mary, according to Shoemaker, and one which synthesizes the various early Dormition traditions.[127] Here, the angel Gabriel makes known to Mary that her Son calls her "to relinquish

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[122] Ibid., 158.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 175.
[125] Ibid., 195.
[126] Ibid., 197.
[127] *The Life of the Virgin by Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Shoemaker, 16.

this world and ascend to the dwelling places of heaven."[128] Throughout the text "translation" is the preferred word to describe the event, which Shoemaker renders with the more familiar "Dormition," though he notes that it is simply a euphemism for "death."[129] When the time came, Mary "entrusted her blessed and immaculate soul to her Lord … and slept a sweet and pleasant sleep," and as in her birthing of Jesus, the "Lord of natures altered the course of nature" so that she experienced no pain.[130] Christ takes care of Mary's soul and the disciples protect and care for her body. Seeming to perceive that some might think it unfitting for the New Eve to die, the author states: "Nevertheless, it is not astonishing that the mother of life was placed in the tomb, for her son also, who is himself life and immortality, endured death in the flesh and deposition in the tomb, and by his death he destroyed death and gave life to the world."[131] Yet, unlike traditional descriptions of Christ's dead body, Mary's entombed body is radiant with light, such that even those who loved her most feared to touch it with bare hands.

What this sampling of texts reveals is anything but a clear and consistent tradition of proclaiming that Mary plainly died. They do often refer to her end as a "death," though the tendency is to use more gentle language. But just as often do they retreat from describing it as a real death, and on occasion explicitly deny that Mary could be conquered by death. It appears that in the several centuries following Epiphanius's admission of uncertainty, the Church was in the same position. There were legends of a tomb, of course, but this in itself does not entail that a death occurred, especially as some accounts had Mary's body being assumed almost immediately after the ascent of her soul. Obviously these sources cannot be taken as historical in the strict sense, but they offer insight into the historical consciousness of the Church on the fate of the Mother of God, and it is a consciousness that is riddled with uncertainty in regard to the manner of her transition from earthly to heavenly life.

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[128] Ibid., 130.
[129] Ibid., 195 n 1.
[130] Ibid., 136.
[131] Ibid., 140.

A Speculative Proposal[132]

Most iconographic accounts of the Dormition of Mary have her lying down in repose, eyes closed, surrounded by saints and apostles, under the loving gaze of her Son, who holds in his arms a small child. The child is universally recognized to mean Mary's soul.[133] So there it is—her soul and her body in separation.[134] We know, however, that separation on the iconographic plane does not necessarily translate literally into separation on the plane of truth. When the Holy Spirit is represented as a dove at the Baptism of Christ or "tongues of fire" at Pentecost, hypostatic distinction may be inferred but it does not communicate that the Spirit is in any way separated from the Father or the Son.[135] Icons are texts, and as such we distinguish between the letter and the spirit. What then might the Dormition icon be teaching, if we grant for the moment that it is not teaching Mary's death in a literal sense? In other words, is there a way to maintain the truth of the iconographic tradition apart from the position that Mary was mortal? I suggest it can be interpreted as pointing to something like a mystical-ecstatic separation of body and soul, or more simply, a rapture.

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[132] "In our opinion, no amount of speculative reasoning can rule out the fact of Mary's death which has been universally believed in the Catholic Church for so many centuries" (Juniper Carol, "The Immaculate Conception and Mary's Death," 3). One of the main reasons I offer this account is because it still presents the end of Mary's earthly life as a *kind* of death, and thus would only require a minimal re-appropriating of the tradition to which Carol refers.

[133] Vladimir Lossky and Leonide Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1999), 214.

[134] Bulgakov asserts: "According to church tradition, which finds full confirmation in the liturgy and iconography, when the Ever-Virgin passed away, she handed her spirit over to her Son who had appeared in order to receive it in glory with all the holy angels." He then goes on to distinguish her death, along with that of all mere humans, from Christ's on two accounts: the fact that Christ was active even in his death, and the fact that he was not subject to the law of death (Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 74). Andrew of Crete is an early example of making the appeal to what it depicted in the icon: "Anyone who chooses can confirm what I am saying with his own eyes. For before the gaze of those who look on holy things with faith, there stand here clear images (εἰκόνες), eloquent representations of my passing .... The hollow of that rock are incontrovertible witnesses that my body lay within it, showing—in sacred art—the gracious form of my limbs." *On the Dormition of Mary*, trans. Daley, 124.

[135] In a similar way, in the Dormition icon itself there is an element of material-spiritual discontinuity—Christ, who is inseparably united to his flesh, appears holding the soul of Mary. Do we take the image of Christ to be strictly his immaterial human soul?

The kind of mystical experience wherein the subjects perceive the normative soul-body relation to be suspended for a period has deep roots in the Christian tradition, going back to the Scriptures themselves. There is Paul's account of someone, possibly himself, being "caught up to the third heaven," in which he explicitly draws attention to the uncertainty of the state of the body.[136] Then there are multiple episodes of prophetic visions of heavenly or spiritual realities that could be classified as ecstatic experiences. However, the sources which are more substantial, in the sense that the descriptions of the experiences are more detailed, are found in monastic literature. With Mary, obviously there would be no account of her ecstasy (other than what onlookers, if there were any, perceived) if it coincided with the end of her earthly life, but there is enough testimony about such experiences from other saints to warrant speculation on the matter, especially when combined with the theological considerations and the hagiographical testimony.

Clearly this is not the place to survey the phenomena of ecstatic experience in Christian history.[137] What I will do instead is use the autobiographical accounts of ecstatic experience by two figures, Symeon the New Theologian and Teresa of Avila, as guides into how we might imagine the Dormition of the Theotokos as a rapturous event. I chose these two, representatives of East and West, because they are known for the vividness and intimacy with which they describe their encounters with God; both faced skepticism during their own time, and both are now honored with the highest titles (Theologian and Doctor) of their respective traditions.

Symeon relates one of his many experiences in a catechetical discourse delivered to the monks at his monastery.[138] He begins by describing his yearning for the illumination spoken of by his spiritual father. "So great … was my desire and longing for such a blessing that as I thought thereof I forgot all things earthly and heavenly, to the extent even of eating and drinking and bodily relief."[139] Then, after receiving

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[136] 2 Cor 12:2–4.

[137] A good place to begin such a survey is the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité: ascétique et mystique doctrine et histoire*, bk. IV, pt. 2, ed. André Rayez and Charles Baumgartner, S.J. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1961), under the entry "Extase," col. 2072–171.

[138] *Catechesis* 16; *Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses*, trans. C.J. de Catanzaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 198–203.

[139] Ibid., §1, 198.

guidance from his elder and the directive to pray the Trisagion before going to sleep, he relates the following.

> So I entered the place where I usually prayed and, mindful of the words of the holy man I began to say, 'Holy God.' At once I was so greatly moved to tears and loving desire for God that I would be unable to describe in words the joy and delight I then felt. I fell prostrate on the ground, and at once I saw, and behold, a great light was immaterially shining on me and seized hold of my whole mind and soul, so that I was struck with amazement at the unexpected marvel and I was, as it were, in ecstasy ….' Whether I was in the body, or outside the body,' I conversed with this Light …. It expelled from me all material denseness and bodily heaviness that made my members to be sluggish and numb … it seemed to me as though I was stripping myself of the garment of corruption …. In a marvelous way there was granted to me and revealed to me the manner of the departure from this present life.[140]

In another discourse, during one of these times of "ascent," God himself speaks to Symeon and describes what he is experiencing: "Behold, though you are subject to death, you have become immortal, and though you are ruled by corruption you find yourself above it."[141] Symeon's biographer relates that because his *soul* had become so intent on communion with God, his *body* was only constrained by its needs (sleep, food, water) when Symeon willed it so.[142]

There are several themes appearing here that recur throughout Symeon's reporting of his experiences: intensity of desire, the shedding of tears, illumination, and a perceptible state of ecstasy coinciding with

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[140] Ibid., §3, 200–1. Niketas gives his own details about this or a similar event, where Symeon perceives his own body being transfigured, during which he hears a voice from heaven saying, "This is how it has been determined that the holy ones who are alive and who remain are to be transformed at the last trumpet, and in this state caught up, as Paul says" (*The Life of Saint Symeon the New Theologian by Niketas Stethatos*, trans. Richard P. H. Greenfield [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013], 157).

[141] *Catechesis* 17, §6; Ibid., 205.

[142] *The Life of Saint Symeon the New Theologian by Niketas Stethatos*, trans. Greenfield, 81.

an altered relation between soul and body. Compare this to the account of Mary's Dormition in the *Life of the Virgin* attributed to Maximus the Confessor, where there is remarkable similarity in thematic overlay.[143] Knowing through angelic communication that her Son is coming for her, she prepares her dwelling "as a bridal chamber worthy to receive her immortal bridegroom and all-gracious son, because she was waiting with steadfast hope."[144] After her friends arrive and she informs them about the impending event, she lies down on "the bed that until that time had been bathed from night to night with the tears of her eyes in longing for her son Christ and enlightened by her prayers and supplications."[145] Christ himself then appears, after the apostles arrive, and the author describes this appearance of Christ as even "more radiant" than in the Transfiguration.[146] The light of Christ transfers to his Mother when she catches sight of him, so that she is illumined as well. Her Son blesses her, telling her that "every grace and gift has been given to you by my heavenly Father."[147] And after Christ receives her soul and she falls into a "sweet and pleasant sleep," an "unapproachable light spread forth over the holy body."[148] Her body remains shrouded in light in the tomb, and even after they discover it has been assumed into heaven, a lingering radiance still fills the tomb.

Now consider the manner in which St. Teresa describes her most profound religious experience—rapture (*arrobamiento*)—especially the effect it has on the body. "In these raptures the soul seems no longer to animate the body, and thus the natural heat of the body is felt to be very sensibly diminished: it gradually becomes colder, though conscious of the greatest sweetness and delight."[149] Christ's love is so strong that "He seems not to be satisfied by literally [*de veras*] drawing the soul to

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[143] The authenticity of this text as a work of Maximus is still questionable, although Maximian authorship has by no means been ruled out, as Shoemaker notes in the introduction to his translation. *The Life of the Virgin by Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Shoemaker, 6–7.

[144] Ibid., 131.

[145] Ibid., 132.

[146] Ibid., 135.

[147] Ibid., 136.

[148] Ibid.

[149] *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2010), 119. *Obras Completas de Santa Teresa*, "Libro de la Vida" 20.3, eds. Efren de la Madre de Dios and Otger Steggink (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1974), 90.

Himself, but will also have the body, mortal though it is."[150] In ecstasy, Teresa feels like she is verging on death and states that "for a great part of the time during which it is in that state, the faculties are inactive" or "suspended."[151] Moreover, this is not simply the perception of the saint herself but is corroborated by observers who themselves are not in a state of ecstasy. Her monastic sisters report that her pulse appears to stop and her body goes stiff, as if *rigor mortis* has set in.[152] As long as the rapture lasts, "the body often remains as if dead and unable of itself to do anything," and it stays in whatever position it was in when the rapture began.[153] The most intense part of the ecstasy is when "the faculties are lost through being closely united with God."[154]

Such are the characteristics of an ecstatic state according to Teresa. If we take this along with Symeon's account, we can quite easily imagine how the Dormition of Mary could be understood as a sort of rapture *par excellence*—a moment which, unlike theirs, does not end with a return to normal earthly life but with her complete assumption into heaven. The ingredients, to put it crudely, for an ecstatic experience are there (extreme longing, personal sanctity, tears, the vision of Christ, illumination, union with God) but to a greater degree in Mary than in Symeon, Teresa, or anyone else. Obviously it may not be the case that all ecstatic experiences share these same markers, but if we take it for granted that the two accounts related above are normative, then we can understand the difficulties the ancients faced in contemplating the Dormition and thus their tendency to describe her "death" in such ambiguous terms. The enraptured Mother of God would have appeared dead, just as Teresa did to her sisters, and just as Adam in the creation of Eve. The bodies of Symeon and Teresa seem to have born witness to the idea that the ascent of the soul and its union with God has somatic effects; namely that it tends toward incorruptibility and ceases to require

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[150] *Libro de la Vida* 20.7; *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, 121; *Obras Completas*, 91.

[151] *Libro de la Vida* 20.11; *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, 123; *Obras Completas*, 92.

[152] *Libro de la Vida* 20.12; *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, 124; *Obras Completas*, 92.

[153] *Libro de la Vida* 20.18; *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, 125; *Obras Completas*, 93.

[154] Ibid.; *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, 126.

sustenance. If Mary experienced something like this, the state of her soul would certainly exceed that of any other saint, so we could assume that the effect on her body would be greater as well. And if we defined death based on the inactivity of the body, Mary would not have escaped death in this reading. But the Christian definition of death has always focused on the relation between soul and body, not on the state of the body itself. Thus we can rightly imagine Mary to have been in such a state that her body exhibited all the signs that we have come to associate with death—breathless, pulseless, unmoving—not as a result of her soul actually *separating* from her body but as a result of her soul becoming *united* to God in a most perfect way. This union is what the Holy Mother longed for with all the strength of her love, and as the perfect Son, Jesus graciously granted her the desire of her heart.

Conclusion

Theologically, the evidence for Mary's true immortality is both positive and negative. There are theological reasons to doubt that she was subject to death and to question the cause of her death if she was not subject to it; and then there are theological reasons which would seem to lead to the conclusion that Mary never ceased to be a living human being. Sacred Scripture offers no narrative account of Mary's life post-Pentecost, but there is typological evidence in both testaments which can be read in favor of her immortality. Historically, Christian reflection on the matter is marked by tension, perplexity, and mystery. The tendency was to admit that Mary died, with varying degrees of reluctance, but to speak of that death as unlike any other. It became traditional to refer to it as *sleep* rather than *death*, and not merely as a way of expressing the general truth after Christ that all death can be considered as sleep. Speculatively, there is evidence from testimonies of religious experience which can be used to imagine the Dormition tradition as pointing to an ecstatic death rather than a literal death, and this reading is supported by some descriptions of Mary's passing in early homilies on the Dormition. All of this together by no means leads to the certain conclusion that the Blessed Virgin was saved from death, but it should be enough to stir further reflection on the issue.