



Assumption and Cremation

Solemnity of the Assumption

Rev 11:19,12:1-6,10; 1Cor15:20-27; Lk 1:39-56

“The Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death.”

These were the words with which Pope Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption 53 years ago, solemnizing the belief of Christians throughout the centuries. The Blessed Mother was taken up BODY AND SOUL into heaven by God. Hence this is a unique feast in the Church’s calendar. We celebrate lots of saints throughout the year, who, through the presence of miracles God grants through their intercession and the heroic virtue of their lives on earth, are declared to be in heaven — but only their souls are in heaven, awaiting reunion with their bodies at the resurrection on the last day. With Mary we celebrate something more: the reality that not only her soul but also her body is in God’s presence in heaven. Both her soul and her body are experiencing eternal beatitude.

Thus, this feast is more than merely a celebration in honor of the blessed Mother. It is a celebration of heaven, a celebration of the fact that one day those who live and die in the Lord as she did will spend eternity body and soul in heaven, alongside her, alongside her son, with all the angels and saints who have gone before us. As Pope Pius XII said in 1950, “The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son’s Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians.”

Heaven is our ultimate vocation. We are called there by God. But God left us free to accept that offer or to reject it and we accept it or reject it in every moral decision we make. Every moral choice is either geared toward heaven, toward God, toward real love, toward eternity, or away from God through sin. Mary’s exaltation as an example to us of what discipleship is all about shows us as well the path to heaven, which starts with a hunger to do God’s will, to say “yes” to His will as she did through the Archangel Gabriel, even when it’s hard. The Kingdom of Heaven is anticipated here on earth when we do God’s will. Jesus taught us this truth in the Our Father. The Jews used to use “couplets” in their prayers, repeating the same thought in successive lines with different words. For example, Mary says in today’s Gospel, “My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” She prayed more or less the same thing in different words. Jesus follows the same model when he teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come! thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The kingdom of God comes when God’s will be done. To anticipate the kingdom of heaven here in this life and to enter into it eternally comes through doing God’s will, loving as Christ loved us, keeping

his commandments as Christ did, putting our treasure in God and choosing God in our decisions, just as the saints did on earth and continue to do in heaven. Heaven is the place for those who love God's will and do it. CS Lewis used to teach that there are ultimately two types of people in the world: those who say to God, "Thy will be done!" and those to whom God says, "THY will be done!," because throughout their life they said "MY will be done!" God respected our freedom so much that he gave eternal consequences to the choices we make. The whole point of human life is to choose well.

Today we celebrate the fact that Mary, the Blessed Mother, chose God. Her "yes" was not a one-time thing, but a continual choice throughout her life, a perennial "let it be done to me according to your word." Her "yes" to Gabriel was preceded by years' worth of saying yes to God through prayer. It was succeeded by a long succession of daily yesses, especially the heroic one she said at the foot of the Cross, when her own heart was pierced with sorrow as Simeon prophesied. She chose God with her whole being, a being, which "magnified the Lord and rejoiced in God her Savior." And God brought all of her, body, and soul, into heaven.

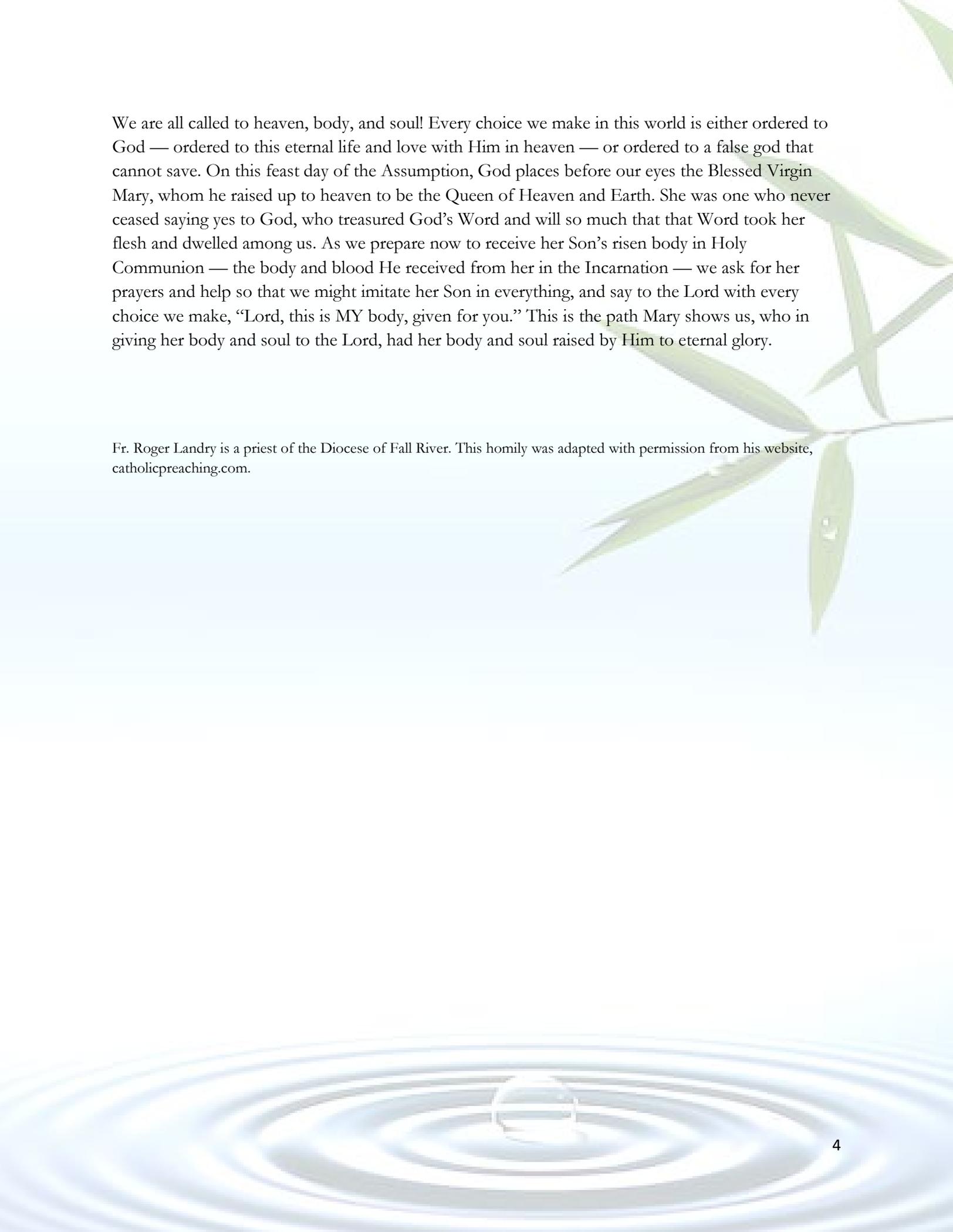
This feast of Mary's Assumption also teaches us something very important about the eternal destiny of our human body: Our bodies are ultimately destined for heaven — not just our souls. Our bodies will rise again to be reunited with our souls eternally. Because Mary's body never knew sin, her body, like that of her Son, would not know corruption at the end of her earthly life and would be taken up into heaven by God. Our bodies, which do know sin, will experience the corruption of death, which is the consequence of sin, but at the end of time, they will be raised to be reunited with our souls forever. Because our bodies are destined for heaven, for God, for eternity, the Church has always had great reverence for the human body in life and in death. She shows this reverence in a particular way by fulfilling the spiritual work of mercy of reverently burying the human body in anticipation of the resurrection on the last day. And for the early Christians, burial always took a specific form. In the midst of a pagan culture that didn't believe in the resurrection of the body — a culture that thought the Catholic claim that Jesus rose from the dead was absolutely absurd — and almost always cremated their loved ones, the early Christians, in faithful anticipation of the resurrection of the body, buried their dead full-body style. Following the teaching of St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 15:35-49), they looked at the human body as a seed they would plant in the ground that would, like any seed, die, but then germinate into eternal life at the resurrection of the dead. The commonly marked their graves with inscriptions signifying that the bodies were being placed there temporarily, "sleeping with Christ," or "deposited" in anticipation of a later divine "withdrawal." The way Christians buried their dead gave witness to the world of their faith in the reality of Christ's bodily resurrection and of the eternal destiny of the human body in the resurrection and the dead. It put into action what we Christians profess in the Creed, "I believe ... in the resurrection of the body and in the life everlasting."

Today we live in a culture that no longer really believes in Christ and in the fact of his Resurrection. Many people, including Christians without knowing it, have become Platonists about the after-life, thinking only souls survive. Many non-Christians are doubting the reality of any life after death, and consequently often choose to live for this life alone, as if this were all there was. In the midst of this neo-pagan culture that no longer believes in what the Son of God revealed about life after death, it's not surprising that, like the early pagans, people are cremating their loved ones more and more frequently. And it also shouldn't come as a shock that very often after cremating their loved ones, people are doing all types of things not in accord with the sacred dignity of human remains, such as

scattering them on beaches or from planes and boats, or treating them like a possession and keeping them at home, where all types of things can and have happened to them over time. Many no longer see the point, many no longer see the value, of burying their loved ones as Jesus was buried. Thanks be to God Joseph of Arimathea was able to get possession of Jesus' body so that the devout Jewish women could anoint and bury him in anticipation of his resurrection. If Jesus had been handled by pagan women, or if the Roman pagan soldiers had gotten hold of him, he would most likely have been cremated. Imagine that! When Jesus would have been raised, everybody would have thought he were simply a ghost, and there would have been no way to prove otherwise, because there would have been no empty tomb and the urn in which he might have been cremated might just have been emptied in some other way.

The Catholic Church, in imitation of Christ who was buried full-body style, and in evangelical witness to the truth that all bodies will rise again on the last day and, for those who have chosen God, spend eternity in heaven, **EARNESTLY ASKS ALL HER CHILDREN TO BURY THEIR LOVED ONES FULL-BODY STYLE.** Since 1961, the Church has allowed cremation “in **EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES,**” if it is not done as an explicit denial of the resurrection of the body. Since the Church began to permit this “in extreme circumstances,” however, more or more Catholics have begun to cremate their loved ones in ordinary circumstances. Extreme circumstances would refer to a body discovered badly decomposed, or to extreme financial hardship or tremendous inconvenience which may occur, for example, when someone dies very far away, and the transportation hardships and costs are insurmountable. But I once was asked by a parishioner, “What does the Church do when a person who isn't aware of the Church's teaching has asked in a will to be cremated for ‘non-extreme circumstances?’” I replied that the Church is not generally going to increase the pain and suffering of the family by refusing a funeral and Christian burial, provided that the ashes are going to be buried reverently as the Church requires. Quite perceptively, the parishioner then said, “Well, Father, I guess the time to talk to people about the Church's teaching regarding cremation is before they die and ask to be cremated.” He is right. That's why I'm doing this now, on this feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven, body and soul, which is one of the few times during the year when such a topic would be germane to a homily. I know that this is not an easy subject for everyone. By this point, we have probably known loved ones who were cremated who were very good people. But in most circumstances, I would guess, most of them didn't know what the Church taught on the matter, and likely would have chosen to be buried like Christ if they knew that that was the Church's clear and unchanging preference in all but extreme circumstances. The point of this homily is not to point to the past or to judge anyone's decision, but to try to stem the tide and to make sure Catholics know what the Church asks, so that they can choose well. To those who might be thinking about being cremated, I would ask you, on behalf of the Church, to reconsider. Show by your choice to be buried like Christ that you believe in the truth of the resurrection of the body, during a world that no longer really believes in it. Give witness to the fact that you are a Christian in life and in death and want to follow Christ, the Way, all the way, even in the way you are buried.





We are all called to heaven, body, and soul! Every choice we make in this world is either ordered to God — ordered to this eternal life and love with Him in heaven — or ordered to a false god that cannot save. On this feast day of the Assumption, God places before our eyes the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom he raised up to heaven to be the Queen of Heaven and Earth. She was one who never ceased saying yes to God, who treasured God’s Word and will so much that that Word took her flesh and dwelled among us. As we prepare now to receive her Son’s risen body in Holy Communion — the body and blood He received from her in the Incarnation — we ask for her prayers and help so that we might imitate her Son in everything, and say to the Lord with every choice we make, “Lord, this is MY body, given for you.” This is the path Mary shows us, who in giving her body and soul to the Lord, had her body and soul raised by Him to eternal glory.

Fr. Roger Landry is a priest of the Diocese of Fall River. This homily was adapted with permission from his website, catholicpreaching.com.