

Sting of Death Is Sin
Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(1 Cor 15:54-57)

“*The sting of death is sin*” (1 Cor 15:56).¹ In the letter to the Romans, St. Paul states it the other way: “*The wages of sin is death*” (Rm 6:23). There is an intimate connection between sin and death, between man’s disobedience to God, and the dissolution of his soul from his body.

When God created man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, He clothed his mortal nature with a special grace. There was no death. God intended that after a time in which man cultivated the garden in this world, through the work of his hands and the raising of a family,² man would then be translated to heavenly glory in God’s Kingdom.

But the devil said God was a liar, and tempted man to eat the forbidden fruit of disobedience, and accept his life on his terms, not God’s. It is likely the devil threatened the man with death unless he ate the forbidden fruit.³ In the end, man chose to live on his own terms, to be his own god, and as a result he experienced what it was to be mortal man, and no more. Man lost that divine grace which radiated in his soul and perfected the mortal flesh of his body. Immediately man felt “naked” and exposed (Gn 3:7), vulnerable, having lost this divine clothing.

Now, man experienced fatigue, injury, bruising, illness, disharmony within his members, disarray, and deterioration. His spiritual soul, though immortal, was not sufficient to sustain in immortality his body, made of clay. In the end, man experienced death, the dissolution of his soul from his body, and its passing into unnatural darkness – “Sheol,” while his body dissolved and returned to the dust. In the end, man learned that God was true, while the devil was a liar. God is the author of life, while the devil brings only death.

There is, then, a direct connection between sin and death. From sin comes death, all sin leads to death, not only of the mortal body, but also of the soul after death. Death is now universal for man, because “in Adam all have sinned” (Rm 5:12, 1Cor 15:22). Man’s body goes the way of all the other mortal creatures and animals, though this was never the original plan of God. It is this curse of Original Sin that we acknowledge on Ash Wednesday when we place the dust on our forehead. It is from this curse that God sent His Son to free us.

Christ conquered man’s death, by taking upon himself and paying – in his body – the price of sin on the Cross. The Son of God became Man in order to open

¹ Second Reading, Vigil Mass of the Assumption

² “God blessed the man saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Gn 1:28)

³ If you eat the fruit you will not die (Gn 3:4). I.E., “Eat it or else!”

up for man the path to Life; to restore again to human nature the divine grace that prevents death. This grace of new life comes insofar as sin is conquered. Because *“the sting of death is sin,”* life cannot be restored unless sin is forgiven and paid. Thus the Cross is necessary to restore life. By the fruits of his Redemption which conquers sin in our life, made available to us in Baptism, we pass with Christ through the Cross to the Resurrection. We pass through our human death, accepted as a penance for sin, to eternal life in the Resurrection on the last day. We have been restored to life, but via penance: sin must be conquered and purified.⁴

But today we celebrate something special. In all of human nature, there is a single example of a human being who never experienced the death of Adam’s sin. That is the Blessed Virgin Mary, Christ’s mother, the “Mother of God.” Adam and Eve experienced death as a consequence of their sin. All their descendants experienced death, as the curse of Original Sin. Even Jesus the Son of God, though sinless, even he experienced death. Though sinless, he took upon himself the curse of sin, and identified with fallen Adam,⁵ in order to conquer death.

Mary alone in all our race, never experienced death. And she never experienced death because she never experienced sin, which is the Sting of Death. At the end of her natural life, around the age of 50 or 60, while in Jerusalem with the gathering of apostles, she fell asleep⁶ and her body was laid on a bed. For three days the Church prayed, until in the presence of the apostles, angels took her to heaven. Mary was immediately translated to glory. Her soul never departed from her body. It never corrupted or decayed. One can still visit in Jerusalem the cave in the Kidron valley, near the Garden of Gethsemane, where this took place.⁷ Even though this event was not recorded in the New Testament, it has been remembered and celebrated in the liturgy of the Church since earliest times.

The Solemnity of the Assumption (August 15) is therefore closely connected to the other great Holy Day, the Immaculate Conception (December 8). Because Mary was preserved free from all stain of Original Sin⁸ from the moment of her conception and throughout her life, she never experienced the wages of sin which is death. Mary is that Woman of whom God spoke when he punished the serpent:

“I will put enmity between you and the Woman, between your seed and hers. You will strike at his heel, while he crushes your head” (Gn 3:15).

⁴ “To the last penny” (Mt 5:26).

⁵ “God made him who had no sin to *be sin* for us” (2 Cor 5:21).

⁶ In the Eastern Rites, the Assumption is celebrated as the Feast of the “Dormition” of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

⁷ The somewhat misnamed Church of the Tomb of Mary. Not to be confused with the Church of the Dormition, commemorating the same event, but at a different location.

⁸ I.E., because she was “Full of Grace” (Lk 1:28)

The devil could never touch Mary. He could never infect her with his poison, he could never tempt her with his lies. Unlike Eve who succumbed to the serpent, Mary was protected from him by a wall of “enmity.” Christ the New Adam intervened, placing himself between the serpent and Mary, and while the serpent did indeed strike *his* heel putting him to death on the Cross, that very act crushed and defeated him.

The first-fruits of Christ’s Redemptive act is the preservation of his Blessed Mother, the “New Eve,” from the serpent’s bite, from the sting of death and sin from the first moment of her conception, until her final falling asleep.

Mary is thus exalted and given to us, by the Father through Christ, as the hope of our glory, the sign of our destiny. Where Mary has gone, we will follow as her children. But what was achieved in Mary through a grace of “preservation,” will be achieved in us through a grace of healing and redemption. We, unfortunately, have been bitten, and have felt the sting of death which is sin. Mary, by the grace of God and her divine Son, was never thus bitten by the serpent to begin with.