

# What is the Dormition of Mary, the Mother of God?

August 15 is the date on which St. Mary, the mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ, died. The word *dormition* simply means “falling asleep.”

If you have any Roman Catholic family or friends, they have celebrated today as the *Assumption of Mary* rather than the *Dormition*. The Roman Catholic position is that Mary, just like Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Ki 2:11-12), was bodily assumed into heaven, or at the very least, like Moses, died but her body was taken up by God (Jude 9). (Although, interestingly enough this was not made an official doctrine of the Roman church until it was declared to be fact by Pope Pius XII in 1950 and reiterated by Pope John Paul II in 1997). This belief has absolutely no Scriptural attestation. Mary is not mentioned again after Pentecost. There is no word of her death in the Bible, so we cannot say with Scriptural certainty what happened to Mary upon her death.

The traditional Lutheran position is that Mary died, like any ordinary human, and, like any other person, her soul was assumed into heaven by her Savior. For this reason, Reformation-era Lutherans called today the *Assumption*, but made sure to distance themselves from the Roman position and reiterate that only her **soul** was assumed into heaven. Today many Lutherans refer to this Feast day as the “Dormition” or simply as “The Feast of St. Mary” to distance themselves from extra-scriptural positions held by both the Roman Church and Eastern Orthodoxy.

## I thought Lutherans don't worship Mary?

True. Lutherans do not worship Mary, because true worship belongs to the triune God alone. However, celebrating Feast days like the Dormition of Mary are not observed to give any worship whatsoever to Mary, just like observing any of the other saints like apostles and evangelists is not a day set aside to worship them. The worship and praise are given to God alone who has given us examples of faithful living and has blessed us by their work.

We are also strongly opposed to the attention that some denominations heap upon Mary. She is not to be looked at as some sort of co-redeemer. Luther and his fellow Reformers were very careful to honor Mary, but within reason. They spoke sharply against those who elevated her to a position as a sort of goddess, with divine attributes equal to Christ. They were dismayed at how many people “pray and flee to her rather than God” even though “she gives nothing, God gives all.”<sup>1</sup> Nor would Mary want us to worship her, just like Paul or Matthew or Isaiah would not want the worship due to God alone. Melancthon said it best: “Even though she is worthy of the highest honor, nevertheless she does not want herself to be made equal with Christ but instead wants us to consider and follow her example.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AE 21:327-28

<sup>2</sup> Ap XXI 27

## **But Lutherans do hold Mary in high regard.**

That being said, Luther did hold Mary in very high regard, and, historically, Lutherans have as well. It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century that Mary became a name that could only be said in connection to Christmas and never again. Consider some of these quotes from Luther:

- Mary is, “the most blessed Mother of God, the most blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>
- “Was not hers a wondrous soul?”<sup>4</sup>
- “No one can say anything greater of her or to her, though he has as many tongues as there are leaves on the trees, or grass in the fields, or stars in the sky, or sand by the sea.”<sup>5</sup>
- Ultimately he reiterates her title as “Queen of heaven,” although he makes clear that this does not put her on any equal footing with God Himself.<sup>6</sup>

## **Why do we call her the “Mother of God?”**

It may sound like a stretch to assert that an earthly woman could be called the Mother of God. Doesn't this imply that she is the mother of the Trinity? Isn't it better to refer to her as the “Mother of Jesus?” Quite simply, no. Calling Mary the “Mother of God” in no way implies that she is anything greater than she is, while at the same time honoring who she is, as the faithful Hebrew girl chosen to give flesh and blood to God Himself, to bear Him in safety to be the savior of mankind. The Church has historically given her this title since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and it was reiterated in the 4<sup>th</sup> in the Liturgy of St. James (the same source as our hymn “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”). And our Lutheran Confessions, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, we say, “Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that Mary did not conceive and give birth to one who was merely, purely, simply human, but she gave birth to the true Son of God. Therefore, she is rightly called and truly is the Mother of God,”<sup>7</sup>

## **What is the middle ground?**

We as confessional Lutherans believe we stand in the middle ground, the right position on Mary. We do not pray to her as our Roman Catholic friends do. However, we esteem her and honor her just like we do people like St. Paul or Moses or any other person named in Scripture and used by God for the benefit of His people. Mary is not just any woman but does deserve a place of special honor in the Church. Which of us have been selected as the earthly mother of God Himself? Her faith and pious Christian life serve as an example to us. She was willing to bear the scorn of this world, to experience the piercing through of her motherly soul as she watched her Son be executed, and to surrender herself to God's will, whatever that might be, as we saw at the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11). For this reason, her feast day ought to be kept with the eagerness and reverence as any apostle or evangelist. God has given her to us, not to worship, but to be an example and encouragement in the Christian life. That is exactly what we intend to do this day as we commemorate her death in the faith and look forward to our own.

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<sup>3</sup> AE 21:298

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 308

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 326

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 327

<sup>7</sup> Ap XXI 12