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"The best of life is yet to come"

In his 24 August general audience, Pope Francis concluded his catechesis on old age, speaking about our Lady's Assumption into heaven.

08/24/2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good day!

We recently celebrated the Assumption into heaven of the Mother of Jesus. This mystery illuminates the fulfilment of the grace that shaped Mary's destiny, and

it also illuminates our destination, doesn't it? The destination is heaven. With this image of the Virgin assumed into heaven, I would like to conclude the cycle of catecheses on old age. In the West, we contemplate her lifted up, enveloped in glorious light; in the East she is depicted reclining, sleeping, surrounded by the Apostles in prayer, while the Risen Lord holds her in his hands like a child.

Theology has always reflected on the relationship of this singular 'assumption' with death, which the dogma does not define. I think it would be even more important to make explicit the relationship of this mystery with the resurrection of the Son, which opens the way for the generation of life for us all. In the divine act of reuniting Mary with the Risen Christ, the normal bodily corruption of human death, and not only this, is not simply transcended,

the bodily assumption of the life of God is anticipated. In fact, the destiny of the resurrection that pertains to us is anticipated: because, according to Christian faith, the Risen One is the firstborn of many brothers and sisters. The Risen Lord is the one who went first, first, who rose first, in the first place; then we will go, but this is our destiny: to rise again.

We could say — following Jesus' words to Nicodemus — that it is a little like a second birth (cf. *Jn* 3:3-8). If the first was a birth on earth, this second is a birth in heaven. It is no coincidence that the Apostle Paul, in the text that was read at the beginning, speaks of the pains of childbirth (cf. *Rom* 8:22). Just as, in the moment we come out of our mother's womb, we are still ourselves, the same human being that was in the womb; so, after death, we are born to heaven, to God's

space, and we are still ourselves, who walked on this earth. It is analogous to what happened to Jesus: the Risen One is still Jesus: he does not lose his humanity, his experience, or even his corporality, no, because without it he would no longer be himself, he would not be Jesus: that is, with his humanity, with his lived experience.

The experience of the disciples, to whom he appears for forty days after his resurrection, tells us this. The Lord shows them the wounds that sealed his sacrifice; but they are no longer the ugliness of the painfully suffered disgrace, they are now the indelible proof of his faithful love to the very end. The risen Jesus with his body lives in the Trinitarian intimacy of God! And in it he does not lose his memory, he does not abandon his history, he does not dissolve the relationships he lived on earth. To his friends he promised: 'And if I go and prepare a place for you – He left

to prepare a place for us, for all of us – and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also' (*Jn 14:3*). And he will come, not only will he come at the end for everyone, he will come each time for each one of us. He will come to seek us out to bring us to him. In this sense, death is a kind of step toward the encounter with Jesus who is waiting for me to bring me to him.

The Risen One lives in God's world, where there is a place for everyone, where a new earth is being formed, and the heavenly city, man's final dwelling place, is being built. We cannot imagine this transfiguration of our mortal corporality, but we are certain that it will keep our faces recognizable and allow us to remain human in God's heaven. It will allow us to participate, with sublime emotion, in the infinite and blissful exuberance of God's creative act,

whose endless adventures we will experience first-hand.

When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, he describes it as a wedding feast; as a party, that is, like a party, a party with friends awaits us; as the work that makes the house perfect, and the surprise that makes the harvest richer than the sowing.

Taking seriously the Gospel words about the Kingdom enables our sensitivities to enjoy God's working and creative love, and puts us in tune with the unprecedented destination of the life we sow. In our old age, my dear contemporaries – and I speak to the old men and old women – in our old age, the importance of the many 'details' of which life is made — a caress, a smile, a gesture, an appreciated effort, an unexpected surprise, a hospitable cheerfulness, a faithful bond — becomes more acute. The essentials of life, which we hold most dear as we approach our

farewell, become definitively clear to us. See: this wisdom of old age is the place of our gestation, which illuminates the lives of children, of young people, of adults, of the entire community. We, the elderly, should be this for others: light for others. Our whole life appears like a seed that will have to be buried so that its flower and its fruit can be born. It will be born, along with everything else in the world. Not without labour pains, not without pain, but it will be born (cf. *Jn* 16:21-23). And the life of the risen body will be a hundred and a thousand times more alive than we have tasted it on this earth (cf. *Mk* 10:28-31).

Dear brothers and sisters, the Risen Lord, not by chance, while waiting for the Apostles by the lake, roasts some fish (cf. *Jn* 21:9) and then offers it to them. This gesture of caring love gives us a glimpse of what awaits us as we cross to the other shore. Yes,

dear brothers and sisters, especially you elderly, the best of life is yet to come. 'But we are old, what more is yet to come?' The best, because the best of life is yet to come. Let us hope, let us hope for this fullness of life that awaits us all, when the Lord calls us. May the Mother of the Lord and our Mother, who has preceded us to heaven, restore to us the eager anticipation of expectation, because it is not an anaesthetized expectation, it is not a bored expectation, no, it is an expectation with eager anticipation, it is an expectation: 'When will my Lord come? When will I be able to go there?' A little bit of fear, because I don't know what this passage means, and passing through that door causes a little fear – but there is always the hand of the Lord that carries us forward, and beyond the door there is the party.

Let us be attentive, dear old people,
contemporaries, let us be attentive.
He is expecting us. Just one passage,
and then the party.

Thank you.

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