Feast of the Assumption, 2021

Old St. Pat’s (8:00 and 10:00)

On July 20th the Federal Aviation Administration

 Nuanced the eligibility rules

 For what it takes to be recognized as an astronaut.[[1]](#endnote-1)

 The rule adjustment come in the wake of

 Sir Richard Branson’s launched into space on July 11th

 On his Virgin Galactic rocket plane

 Along with 2 pilots and 3 Galactic employees.

 Branson bested by 9 days the flight of another billionaire

 Jeff Bezos , also aboard his own rocket ship

with 3 companions

 Reached a height of almost 70 miles

 After a very brief 10 minutes and 10 second flight

 At the estimated cost to each passenger

Of about $46,000 a second.

Despite being awarded custom made wings by a former Astronaut

 The FAA’s new rules seem to disqualify the Bezos four

 As real astronauts

 For besides traveling pass the 100-kilometer high edge of space

 The FAA also requires that astronauts

 Demonstrate activities essential to public safety

 Or contributory to human space flight safety.

 Branson’s pilots would seem to qualify

 As they actually flew the Virgin Galactic’s Unity spacecraft

 But it is not evidence that the Branson four

 Accomplished the required activities.

 Bezos New Shephard spacecraft

 Was fully automated, without even a pilot

 So his quartet of space tourists

 Seem even further away from official astronaut status.

Some of you are probably scratching your heads at this point

 Wondering where the befuddled homilist is headed here

 And others might be amused or maybe offended

 By juxtaposing the Feast of the Assumption

 With space tourism.

 I admit it is a someone odd conjunction

 Of Mariology and rocket science

 But since I find today’s feast a touch baffling

 Which of course is the nature of any mystery

 In the face of mystery I need to find some trigger, some analogy

 As offbeat as it might appear

 To help me answer that always gnawing question

 Posed by liturgy and life: So what?

 So what is the meaning or value or purpose

 Of this solemnity of the Assumption?

In order to extract some meaning from this feast

 I read the 1950 decree from Pope Pius XII

 That elevated the universally held belief in Mary’s Assumption

 To the level of a church dogma.[[2]](#endnote-2)

 The dominant sentiments permeating this document

 Are both a sense of deep honor

As well as a strong protective instinct.

 The earliest title officially bestowed upon Mary by the Church

 Is *Theotokos*, “God-Bearer,” “Mother of God”

 Confirmed by a 5th century ecumenical council.

 This title is reflected in today’s readings

 In the vision from Revelation

 Where it is the mother with child

 That provides hope and protection and salvation

 And in Luke’s visitation story

 Where the expectant Mary is recognized as blessed.

 It is Mary’s motherhood that is strongly affirmed

In Pius XII’s papal declaration on the Assumption

 A motherhood that as the document notes

was deeply troubled, filled with hardship and sorrow

a parenting marked by a pierced heart

broken open at the death of her divine son (no. 14).

In some ways the decree from the pope

 Not only praises Mary for her challenging and graced motherhood

 But shapes this decree about the Assumption

 As an act of gratitude

 An act of care

 Even an act of protection by her divine son.

 In one of the most poignant lines of the decree

 The pope echoes a deeply traditional sentiment when he asserts

 That “Jesus would have been dishonored if the flesh

 That had born him,

would have been reduced to dust” (no. 35)

 In that spirit, maybe this feast is the church’s first Mother’s Day

 A feast that declares that the first-born of all creation

 Could not himself experience a privilege

 Such as resurrection, or ascension

 Without also extending that privilege to his own mother.

What could be more natural?

That a child would want her or his parent

To share in their own triumphs and achievements

Especially when that parent

 Had suffered through so many childhood heartbreaks

 Had protected them from so much harm

 And had sacrificed so much so that they could flourish.

A few weeks ago, I presided at the funeral of an old friend

 A kind of second mother whom I had met almost 50 years ago.

 In crafting the homily in dialogue with her 5 living children

 She had lost a teenage son around the time I first met her

 They made it clear that her vocation

 The calling in which she especially reveled was motherhood:

 Something she did with unflagging commitment and grace

 Despite much suffering and loss in her life.

As part of the funeral homily

 The children and grandchildren allowed me to read

 a reflection by mother and humorist Erma Bombeck.

 In her 1974 Mother’s Day column Bombeck wrote: [[3]](#endnote-3)

*When the Lord God was creating mothers, he was into his sixth day of overtime when an angel appeared and said, "you're doing a lot of fiddling around on this one."*

*And the Lord said, "have you read the specs on this order? she has to be completely washable, but not plastic. . . have 180 moveable parts. . . all replaceable . . . run on black coffee and leftovers . . . have a lap that disappears when she stands up . . . a kiss that can cure anything from a broken leg to a disappointed love affair. . . and six pairs of hands. "*

*The angel shook her head slowly and said, "six pairs of hands? no way! " "it's not the hands that are causing me problems," said the Lord. "it's the three pair of eyes that mothers have to have. “That's on the standard model?" the angel asked.*

*The Lord God nodded: one pair that sees through closed doors when she asks, “what are you kids doing in there?" when she already knows. Another in the back of her head that sees what she shouldn't but what she has to know. And, of course, the ones in front that can look at a child when he goofs up, and says, "I understand and love you" without so much as uttering a word."*

*"Lord," said the angel touching his sleeve gently, "go to bed. Tomorrow is another day."*

*"I can't," said the Lord. "I'm so close now. Already I have one who heals herself when she is sick, can feed a family of six on one pound of hamburger, and can get a nine-year-old to stand under a shower. "*

*The angel circled the model of a mother very slowly. "It's too soft," she sighed.*

*"But tough," said the Lord excitedly. "You cannot imagine what this mother can do."*

*"Can it think?" "Not only think, but it can reason and compromise," said the creator.*

*Finally the angel bent over and ran her finger across the cheek. "There's a leak," she pronounced. "It's not a leak," said the Lord. "It's a tear."*

*“What's it for?" asked the angel. “It's for sadness, joy disappointment, pain, loneliness and pride."*

*"You are a genius," said the angel. But the Lord looked somber and replied, "I didn't put it there."*

The feast of the Assumption

 Celebrates the ultimate Mother’s Day gift from child to parent

 A child who certainly put a tear in eye

 And a sword in the heart of his blessed mother

 To whom, in turn, he granted the eternal gift of life

and even protection from death itself.

 Furthermore, returning to my opening astronautical excursus

 Mary was not a Richard Branson nor a Jeff Bezos.

 She didn’t just go along for the ride

 On a pricy trip into the heavens

 That only billionaires could afford.

 What were the new NASA criteria?

 Essential to public safety

 Or contributory to human space flight safety.

 Mary’s unassuming ministry began with a suspect pregnancy

 reduced her to a refugee in Egypt protecting her first born

 Included the loss of a sainted spouse

 Then ministry demands that extracted her son from her life

 Where she lived on the margins

asking only that we do whatever he tells us (John 2:5)

 ultimately summoning her to witness her child’s crucifixion.

 This was not a life of passivity

 that allowed Jesus to rocket Mary into celestial glory.

 Rather she precisely carved a path for others, for us

 Providing a tested though difficult journey to salvation

 And so paving the way for each of us

 To also be raised up free from corruption on the last day.

 Yes, the mystery of the assumption

 Is also a promise to each of us

 That at the end of time death and resurrection in Christ

 Will lead to our final vindication from all destruction

 Whether we be billionaire or beggar.

Over 4 decades ago I had the privilege of meeting a young seminarian

 Who had quite a musical gift.

 At that time I was writing music reviews for a Catholic Newspaper

 And happened to write a review of his album released in 1979.[[4]](#endnote-4)

 The title song was written for the funeral of a friend’s father

 And is frequently still employed in that ritual.

Yet, in the process of shaping this homily

 That haunting text and refrain have freshly returned to me

 Now as the voice of Christ to the mother

 He wished to spare from death’s destruction,

 But also as the voice of Christ to us

 Who similarly promises that at the ripening of time

 we will all be born up on the wings of eagles

 And made to shine like his blessed mother

 bereft of fear and every darkness or sorrow.

 May this holy feast inspire us to live that future now

 In this challenging and sometimes uncertain present

 Not only to know in the present moment

the faithfulness of an ever-vigilant son

but to become more and more like him

so that we might raise others up as well,

 especially those who especially mirror the life of Mary

the marginalized women and little ones

through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://www.faa.gov/documentLibrary/media/Order/FAA_Order_8800.2.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://holyjoe.org/homilies/homily32.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.discogs.com/Michael-Joncas-On-Eagles-Wings/release/6457541> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)