

Mary's assumption into heaven.

"Those who were on their way home saw from the distance a strange radiance over Mary's tomb," stated Emmerich, in describing this event. "It was as if a shaft of light descended from Heaven towards the tomb, and in this shaft was a lovely form like the soul of the Blessed Virgin, accompanied by the form of Our Lord.

"Then the body of Our Lady, united to the shining soul, rose shining out of the grave and soared to Heaven with the figure of Our Lord."

How should such writings be treated today?

The answer to this is two-fold. First, as private revelations such writings must not be accorded equal or greater authenticity than the Gospels themselves. Private revelations are not given by God to satisfy curiosity or to fill in the gaps of the historical details left out of the Scriptures. Rather, they occur within the context of the prayer life of an individual. A person who has passed through the initial stage of growth in sanctity, called the Purgative Way, in which they have meditated on the Gospels, on Christ's life, on Church teaching, and have exhausted what human language can provide them as food for prayer, enter upon an Illuminative Way in which God provides them new food for contemplation, not descriptions of Christ's life but scenes from it. As the proverb says, a picture is worth a thousand words. The purpose is to bring the intellect to rest in God who is Truth, and to inflame the will to love God who is Good.

As St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross make clear, however, although God can give new lights, most private revelation is "constructed" from the building materials of the memory and knowledge of the person. This means that the mystic's own religious, cultural and educational influences help determine how the visions are presented to them. This accounts, for example, for the variety in the details of the same events among

different mystics. God may have supplied some details, others taken from the presuppositions of the mystic. Since God's purpose is not to improve upon Scripture but to inflame the will with love, the source of the details is ultimately irrelevant to that purpose. In the end, the Church judges the authenticity of such writings not by these details but whether anything is contrary to faith and morals. It does not, therefore, guarantee that every detail is true, only that it is theologically safe.

Secondly, in addition to the general "problem" of interpreting private revelation there is also the specific problem of the uncertainties associated with these particular writings. Both factors argue for reading the writings of Anne Catherine Emmerich as a means to inflame one's love for God and for neighbor, and not as an appendix to Sacred Scripture. Toward that end they can be very fruitful, just as The Passion of The Christ can lead to a fruitful personal meditation on the sufferings of the Lord, without being historical in all its details.

[Resources: The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ]

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Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists

14818 Ranchero Road
Hesperia, California, USA
Telephone: 760-220-6818
FAX: 760-948-7620
E-mail: pjpiisoe@earthlink.net
www.pjpiisoe.org

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Did the Blessed Virgin Mary Die?

While theologians are still discussing it, the general opinion is that Mary died before she was transfigured into glory. It was fitting that she, who imitated Christ most perfectly and united with him in his suffering on Calvary, would also want to unite with him in his dying and going down among the dead. According to the ancient liturgies and the names for the feast of the Assumption, Transitus Virginis, Dormitio, Depositio, they seem to indicate the belief that Mary died. Sin makes death an act to be feared. Because of Mary's sinlessness, however, death was not something to be feared but a time of longing and fulfillment when she would be reunited with her Son, body and soul.

The Church has not offered a definitive statement on this issue. Pope Pius XII did not address the question of whether or not Mary died when he proclaimed the Dogma of the Assumption of Mary into heaven, in the Bull *Munificentissimus Deus*, on 1 November 1950.

The belief that the Virgin Mary had spent her last days in the vicinity of Ephesus and that she had died there, has focused attention on a nun named Anna Catherine Emmerich who had lived in the late 18th century (1774-1820).

In 1811, Emmerich, who had dedicated her life to God, was taken ill in the convent and had to keep to her bed. She was hearing voices, which no one else heard, and was having religious visions. On 29 December 1812, as Emmerich was praying in her bed with her hands stretched out, she was suddenly shaken by a divine force; and seized by a high fever, she became deep red in the face. Just at that moment, a bright light coming from above descended towards her and when it reached her the hands and the feet of the sick woman were suddenly covered with blood as if pierced by nails. The people around the bed were stunned with amazement. It was as if she had partaken of Christ's agony during the Crucifixion, as she had

become a stigmatized nun. The doctors who examined her were greatly astonished, as science could not explain these phenomena.

A writer named C. Brentano began putting into writing the visions and narrations, which Emmerich received. This was not a seer yearning for the limelight. Emmerich virtually never left her sickbed, and without question had a gift of spiritual sight that, though imperfect (as anything humanly-filtered is imperfect), lent tremendous and sometimes startlingly literal insights into the lives of Jesus and Mary.

Emmerich had seen the Virgin Mary leaving Jerusalem with St. John before the persecution of Christians had become worse and their coming to Ephesus; she had also seen that the house in Ephesus was on a mountain nearby and that the Christians who had settled there before lived in tents and caves. Furthermore she said that St. John had built the stone house of the Virgin Mary, and that it was rectangular in plan with a round back wall and had an apse and a hearth. The room next to the apse was her bedroom and there was a stream of water running through it.

Emmerich continued as follows:

"After completing her third year here she had a great desire to go to Jerusalem. John and Peter took her there. She was taken so ill and lost so much weight in Jerusalem that everybody thought she was going to die and they began preparing a grave for her. When the grave was finished the Virgin Mary recovered. She was feeling strong enough to return to Ephesus.

"After returning to Ephesus the Virgin Mary became very weak and at 64 years of age she died. The saints around her performed a funeral ceremony for her and put the coffin they had specially prepared into a cave about two kilometers away from the house".

Emmerich narrated that at this point in her vision St. Thomas arrived in Ephesus after the death of the Virgin Mary cried with sorrow because he had not been able to arrive in time,

whereupon his friends not wanting to hurt his feelings took him to the cave.

The narrative continued:

"When they came to the cave they prostrated themselves. Thomas and his friends walked impatiently to the door. St. John followed them. Two of them went inside after removing the bushes at the entrance of the cave and they kneeled down in front of the grave. John neared the coffin of which a part was protruding from the grave and unlacing its ties he opened the lid. When they all approached the coffin they were stunned in amazement: Mary's corpse was not in the shroud. But the shroud had remained intact. After this event the mouth of the cave containing the grave was closed and the house was turned into a chapel."

What was the Virgin's death actually like according to Emmerich?

"Her maidservant was in the utmost distress, throwing herself on her knees and praying with outstretched arms, sometimes in corners of the house and sometimes outside in front of it. The Blessed Virgin lay still and as though near death in her little cell. She was completely enveloped in a white sleeping coverlet, even her arms being wrapped in it. In the last days of her life I never saw her take any nourishment except now and then a spoonful of juice, which her maidservant pressed, from a bunch of yellow berries like grapes into a bowl near her couch.

"Towards evening the Blessed Virgin realized that her end was approaching and therefore signified her desire, in accordance with Jesus' Will, to bless and say farewell to the Apostles, disciples, and women who were present. Her sleeping cell was opened on all sides, and she sat upright on her couch, shining white as if suffused with light. The Blessed Virgin, after praying, blessed each one by laying her hands on their foreheads.

When the time came, said Venerable Emmerich, after a drawn-out process, "the Blessed

Virgin lay back on her pillows pale and still. Her gaze directed intently upwards; she said no word to anyone and seemed in a state of perpetual ecstasy. She was radiant with longing; I could feel this longing, which was bearing her upwards – "ah, my heart was longing to ascend with hers to God!" Once more the Apostles stood around her bed, praying after celebration of the Eucharist. When the actual moment arrived, said Emmerich, Mary's eyes "were raised towards Heaven in holy joy. Then I saw a wonderfully moving vision. The ceiling of Our Lady's room disappeared, the lamp hung in the open air, and I saw through the sky into the heavenly Jerusalem. Two radiant clouds of light sank down, out of which appeared the faces of many angels. Between these clouds a path of light poured down upon Mary, and I saw a shining mountain leading up from her into the heavenly Jerusalem.

The Blessed Mother then "stretched out her arms towards it in infinite longing," said Emmerich, "and I saw her body, all wrapped up, rise so high above her couch that one could see right under it. I saw her soul leave her body like a little figure of infinitely pure light, soaring with outstretched arms up the shining mountain to Heaven.

"The two angel choirs in the clouds met beneath her soul and separated it from her holy body, which in the moment of separation sank back on the couch with arms crossed on the breast.

"My gaze followed her soul and saw it enter the heavenly Jerusalem by that shining path and go up to the Throne of the Most Holy Trinity."

There were many souls to greet her, said Emmerich, and the Virgin's light was transcendent. She was buried in a tomb near the Ephesus house; a burial spot, which Emmerich claimed, was camouflaged by a spring the Apostles diverted toward the entrance.

Soon after came Mary's Assumption into heaven, which was officially proclaimed by the Church in 1950.