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# 013 - The Assumption and the Modern World

Fulton J. Sheen

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*The Assumption and  
the Modern World*

FULTON J. SHEEN

Number 13

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Bishop, preacher, lecturer, missionary, professor, convert-maker — Fulton J. Sheen has become familiar to millions of Americans of all faiths through his radio and television appearances on "The Catholic Hour" and "Life is Worth Living." Known throughout the world as an author and scholar, he is presently National Director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

Bishop Sheen was educated by the Marianists at Spalding Institute, Peoria, Illinois, and studied at St. Viator's College, the Catholic University of America (where he later served on the faculty for many years), Louvain, and Rome.

Among his numerous books and pamphlets are several Marian works: *The Seven Words of Jesus and Mary* (1945); *Jesus, Son of Mary* (1947); *The Woman* (1951); *Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary* (1952); and *The World's First Love* (1952). The best known of his other works are *God and Intelligence* (1925); *The Mystical Body of Christ* (1935); *Philosophy of Religion* (1948); *Communism and the Conscience of the West* (1948); *Peace of Soul* (1949); *Lift Up Your Hearts* (1950); and *Three to Get Married* (1951).

In this reprint, originally published in the special Assumption issue of *The Thomist* (January 1951), Bishop Sheen shows that as the definition of the Immaculate Conception was particularly appropriate in 1854, so the definition of the Assumption is of distinct significance in our own day.

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# THE ASSUMPTION AND THE MODERN WORLD

FULTON J. SHEEN

**Every defined dogma has two sides: one which looks to clarifying the Tradition which is the living memory of the Mystical Christ; the other which looks to the world and recalls it from its excesses of thought. It is this second aspect alone which interests us presently.**

The decision of the Council of the Vatican that human reason can prove the existence of God, was a Christian Rationalism telling a Kantian world that man ought not to give up on the power of the human brain. The definition of the Immaculate Conception was made when the Modern World was born. Within five years of that date, and within six months of the apparition of Lourdes where Mary said, "I am the Immaculate Conception," Darwin wrote his **Origin of the Species**, Karl Marx completed his **Introduction to the Critique of the Philosophy of Hegel**, ("Religion is the opium of the people"), and John Stuart Mill published his **Essay on Liberty**. At the moment the spirit of the world was drawing up a philosophy that would issue in two World Wars in twenty-one years and the threat of a third, the Church came forward to challenge the falsity of the new philosophy. Darwin took man's mind off his Divine Origin and fastened it on an unlimited future when he would become a kind of God. Marx was so impressed with this idea of inevitable progress that he asked Darwin if he would accept a dedication of his books. Then following Feuerbach, Marx affirmed not a bourgeois atheism of the intellect, but an atheism of the will, in which man hates God because man is God. Mill reduced the freedom of the new man to license and the right to do whatever he pleases, thus preparing a chaos of conflicting egotism, which the world would solve by Totalitarianism.

**If these philosophers were right, and man is naturally good and capable of deification through his own efforts, it follows that every one is immaculately conceived. The Church arose in protest and affirmed that only one human person in all the world is immaculately conceived, that man is prone to sin, and that freedom is best preserved when, like Mary, a creature answers Fiat to the Divine Will.**

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception wilted and killed the false optimism of the inevitable and necessary progress of man without God. Humbled in his Darwinian-Marxian-Millian pride, modern man saw his doctrine of progress evaporate. The interval between the Napoleonic and Franco-Prussian Wars was fifty-five years; the interval between the Franco-Prussian Wars and the First World War was forty-three

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years; the interval between the First and Second World Wars, twenty-one years. Fifty-five, forty-three, twenty-one, and the Korean War five years after the Second World War, is hardly progress. Man finally saw that he was not naturally good. Once having boasted that he came from the beast, he now saw himself acting as a beast.

**Then came the reaction. The Optimistic Man who boasted of his** immaculate conception, now became the Pessimistic Man who could see within himself nothing but a bundle of libidinous, dark, cavernous drives. As in the definition of the Immaculate Conception, the Church had to remind the world that perfection is not biologically inevitable, so now in the definition of the Assumption, it has to give hope to the creature of despair. Modern despair is the effect of a disappointed hedonism and centers principally around Sex and Death. To these two modern ideas, the Assumption is indirectly related.

The primacy of **Sex** is to a great extent due to Freud, whose basic principle in his own words is: "Human actions and customs derive from sexual impulses, and fundamentally, human wishes are unsatisfied sexual desires . . . Consciously or unconsciously, we all wish to unite with our mothers and kill our fathers, as Oedipus did—unless we are female, in which case we wish to unite with our fathers and murder our mothers." The other major concern of modern thought is **Death**. The beautiful philosophy of being is reduced to **Dasein**, which is only **in-der-Welt-sein**. There is no freedom, no spirit, and no personality. Freedom is for death. Liberty is contingency threatened with complete destruction. The future is nothing but a projection of death. The aim of existence is to look death in the eye.

**Sartre passes from a phenomenology of sexuality to that which he calls** "nausea," or a brazen confrontation of nothingness toward which existence tends. Nothing precedes man; nothing follows man. Whatever is opposite him is a negation of his ego, and therefore nothingness. God created the world out of nothingness; Sartre creates nothingness out of the world and the despairing human heart. "Man is a useless passion."

Agnosticism and Pride were the twin errors the Church had to meet in the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception; now it is the despair resulting from Sex and Death it has to meet in this hour. When the Agnostics of the last century came in contact with the world and its three libidos, they became libertines. But when pleasure diminished and made hungry where most it satisfied, the agnostics who had become libertines by at-

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taching themselves to the world, now began in disgust to withdraw themselves from the world and became philosophers of Existentialism. Philosophers like Sartre, and Heidegger, and others are born of a detachment from the world, not as the Christian ascetic, because he loves God, but because they are disgusted with the world. They become contemplatives, not to enjoy God, but to wallow in their despair, to make a philosophy out of it, to be brazen about their boredom, and to make death the center of their destiny. The new contemplatives are in the monasteries of the jaded, which are built not along the waters of Silce, but along the dark banks of the Styx.

**These two basic ideas of modern thought, Sex and Death, are not unrelated.** Freud himself hinted at the union of **Eros** and **Thanatos**. Sex brings death, first of all because in sex the other person is possessed, or annihilated, or ignored for the sake of pleasure. But this subjection implies a compression and a destruction of life for the sake of the **Eros**. Secondly, death is a shadow which is cast over sex. Sex seeks pleasures, but since it assumes that this life is all, every pleasure is seasoned not only with a diminishing return, but also with the thought that death will end pleasure forever. **Eros** is **Thanatos**.

From a philosophical point of view, the Doctrine of the Assumption meets the Eros-Thanatos philosophy head on, by lifting humanity from the darkness of Sex and Death to the light of Love and Life. These are the two philosophical pillars on which rests the belief in the Assumption.

**1. LOVE. The Assumption affirms not Sex but Love.** St. Thomas in his inquiry into the effects of love mentions ecstasy as one of them. In ecstasy one is "lifted out of his body," an experience which poets and authors and orators have felt in a mild form when in common parlance, "they were carried away by their subject." On a higher level, the spiritual phenomenon of levitation is due to such an intense love of God that saints are literally lifted off the earth. Love, like fire, burns upward, since it is basically desire. It seeks to become more and more united with the object that is loved. Our sensate experiences are familiar with the earthly law of gravitation which draws material bodies to the earth. But in addition to terrestrial gravitation, there is a law of spiritual gravitation, which increases as we get closer to God. This "pull" on our hearts by the Spirit of God is always present, and it is only our refusing wills and the weakness of our bodies as a result of sin which keep us earth-bound. Some souls become impatient with the restraining body;

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St. Paul asks to be delivered from its prison house.

If God exerts a gravitational pull on all souls, given the intense love of Our Lord for His Blessed Mother which descended, and the intense love of Mary for Her Lord which ascended, there is created a suspicion that love at this stage would be so great as "to pull the body with it." Given further an immunity from original sin, there would not be in the Body of Our Lady the dichotomy, tension, and opposition that exists in us between body and soul. If the distant moon moves all the surging tides of earth, then the love of Mary for Jesus and the love of Jesus for Mary should result in such an ecstasy as "to lift her out of this world."

**Love in its nature is an Ascension in Christ and an Assumption in Mary.** So closely are Love and the Assumption related that a few years ago when the writer was instructing a Chinese lady, he found that the one truth in Christianity which was easiest for her to believe was the Assumption. She personally knew a saintly soul who lived on a mat in the woods, whom thousands of people visited to receive her blessing. One day, according to the belief of all who knew the saint, she was "assumed" into heaven. The explanation the convert from Confucianism gave was: "Her love was so great that her body followed her soul." One thing is certain; the Assumption is easy to understand if one loves God deeply, but it is hard to understand if one loves not.

Plato in his **Symposium**, reflecting the Grecian view of the elevation of love, says that love of the flesh should lead to love of the spirit. The true meaning of love is that it leads to God. Once the earthly love has fulfilled its task, it disappears, as the symbol gives way to reality. The Assumption is not the killing of the Eros, but its transfiguration through Agape. It does not say that love in a body is wrong, but it does hold that it can be so right when it is Godward, that the beauty of the body itself is enhanced.

**Our Age of Carnality which loves the Body Beautiful is lifted out of** its despair, born of the Electra and Oedipus incests, to a Body that is Beautiful because it is a Temple of God, a Gate through which the Word of Heaven passed to earth, a Tower of Ivory up which climbed Divine Love to kiss upon the lips of His Mother a Mystic Rose. With one stroke of an infallible dogmatic pen, the Church lifts the sacredness of love out of sex without denying the role of the body in love. Here is one body that reflects in its uncounted hues the creative love of God. To a world that worships the body, the Church now says: There are two

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bodies in heaven, one the glorified human nature of Jesus, the other the assumed human nature of Mary. Love is the secret of the Ascension of one and of the Assumption of the other, for Love craves unity with its Beloved. The Son returns to the Father in the unity of Divine Nature; and Mary returns to Jesus in the unity of Human nature. Her nuptial flight is the event to which our whole generation moves.

2. **LIFE.** Life is the second philosophical pillar on which the Assumption rests. Life is unitive; death is divisive. Goodness is the food of life, as evil is the food of death. Errant sex impulses are the symbol of the body's division from God as a result of original sin. Death is the last stroke of that division. Wherever there is sin, there is multiplicity: "My name is Legion; there are many of us." (Mark 5:9). But life is immanent activity. The higher the life, the more immanent is the activity, says St. Thomas. The plant drops its fruit from a tree, the animal drops its kind for a separate existence, but the spiritual mind of man begets the fruit of a thought which remains united to the mind, though distinct from it. Hence intelligence and life are intimately related. **Da mihi intellectum et vivam.** God is perfect life because of perfect inner intellectual activity. There is no extrinsicism, no dependence, no necessary outgoing on the part of God.

Since the imperfection of life comes from remoteness to the source of life and because of sin, it follows that the creature who is preserved from original sin is immune from that psychological division which sin begets. The Immaculate Conception guarantees a highly integrated and unified life. The purity of such a life is threefold; a physical purity which is integrity of body, a mental purity which has no desire for a division of love, which love of creatures apart from God would imply, and finally, a psychological purity which is immunity from the uprising of concupiscence, the sign and symbol of our weakness and diversity. This triple purity is the essence of the most highly unified creature this world has ever seen.

**Added to this intense life, which is free from the division caused by sin, there is still a higher degree of life because of her Divine Motherhood.** Through her portals Eternity became young and appeared as a child; through her as to another Moses, not the tables of the Law, but the Logos was given and written on her own heart; through her, not a manna which men eat and die, but the Eucharist descends, which if a man eats, he will never die. But if those who commune with the Bread of Life never die, then what shall we say of her who was the first living



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Ciborium of that Eucharist, and who on Christmas day opened it at the communion rail of Bethlehem to say to Wise Men and Shepherds: "Behold the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of the world?"

Here there is not just a life free from the division which brings death, but a life united with Eternal Life. Shall she, as the garden in which grew the lily of divine sinlessness and the red rose of the passion of redemption, be delivered over to the weeds and be forgotten by the Heavenly Gardener? Would not one communion preserved in grace through life insure a heavenly immortality? Then shall not she in whose womb was celebrated the nuptials of eternity and time, be more of eternity than time? As she carried Him for nine months, there was fulfilled in another way the law of life: "And they shall be two in one flesh."

**No grown men and women would like to see the home in which they were reared, subjected to the violent destruction of a bomb, even though they no longer lived in it. Neither would Omnipotence, Who tabernacled Himself within Mary, consent to see His fleshy home subjected to the dissolution of the tomb. If grown men love to go back to their homes when they reach the fulness of life, and become more conscious of the debt they owe their mothers, then shall not Divine Life go back in search of His living cradle and take that "flesh-grit paradise" to Heaven with Him, there to be "gardened by the Adam new."**

In this Doctrine of the Assumption, the Church meets the despair of the world in a second way. It affirms the beauty of life as against death. When wars, sex, and sin multiply the discords of men, and death threatens on every side, the Church bids us lift up our hearts to the life that has the immortality of the life which nourished it. Feuerbach said that a man is what he eats. He was more right than he knew. Eat the food of earth, and one dies; eat the Eucharist, and one lives eternally. Be the mother of the Eucharist, and one escapes the decomposition of death.

**The Assumption challenges the nothingness of the Mortician philosophers in a new way. The greatest task of the spiritual leaders today is to save mankind from despair, into which Sex and Fear of Death have cast it. The world that used to say, "Why worry about the next world, when we live in this one," has finally learned the hard way that by not thinking about the next life, one can not even enjoy this life. When optimism completely breaks down and becomes pessimism, the Church holds forth the promise of hope. Threatened as we are by war on all**

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sides, with death about to be rained from the sky by Promethean fires, the Church defines a Truth that has **Life** at its center. Like a kindly mother whose sons are going off to war, she strokes our heads and says: "You will come back alive, as Mary came back again after walking down the valley of Death." As the world fears defeat by death, the Church sings the defeat of death. Is not this the harbinger of a better world, as the refrain of life rings out amidst the clamors of the philosophers of death?

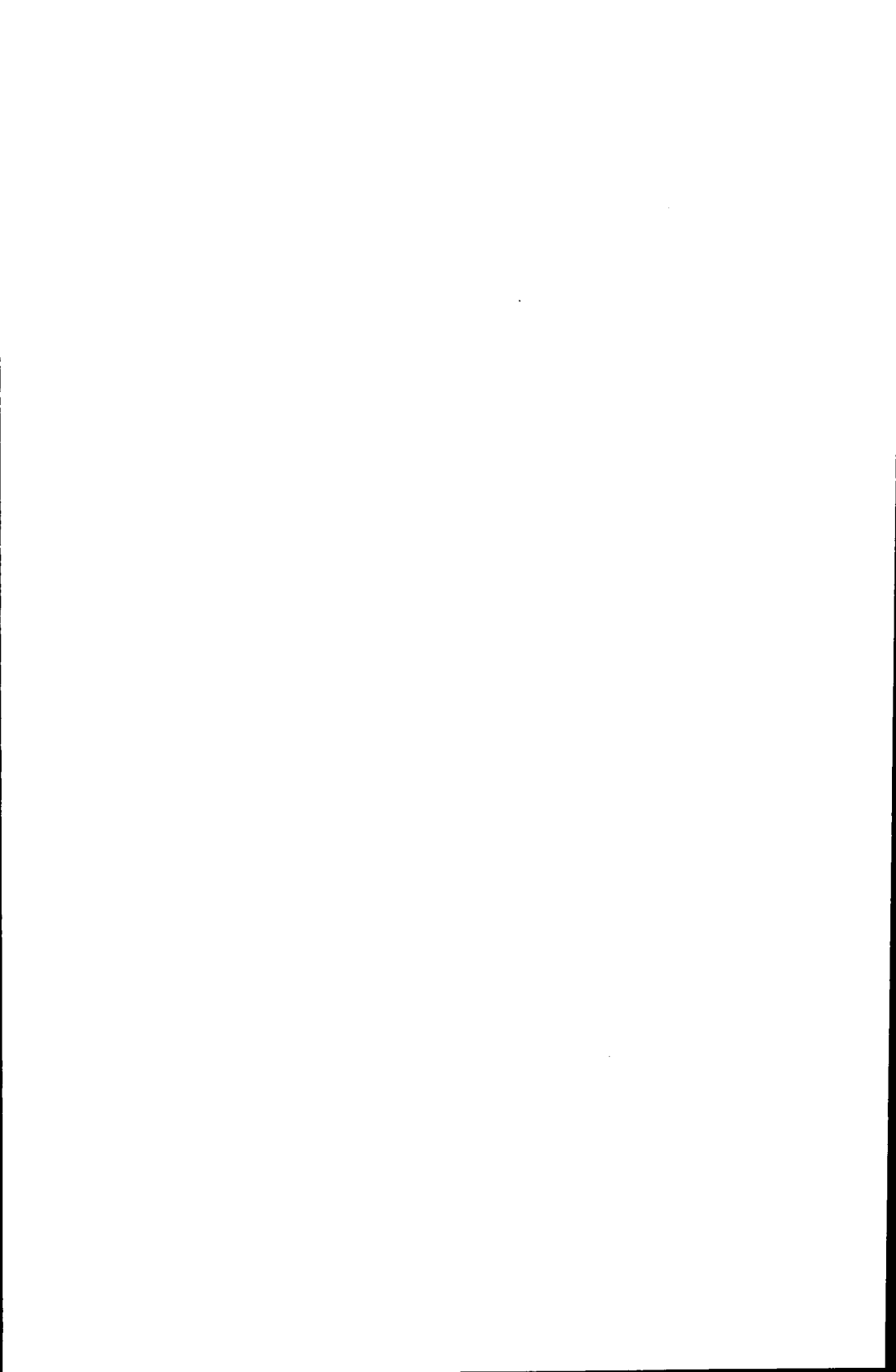
As Communism teaches man has only a body, but not a soul, the Church answers: "Then let us begin with a Body." As the mystical body of the anti-Christ gathers around the tabernacle doors of the cadaver of Lenin, periodically filled with wax to give the illusion of immortality to those who deny immortality, the Mystical Body of Christ bids the despairing to gaze on the two most serious wounds earth ever received; the empty tomb of Christ and the empty tomb of Mary. In 1854 the Church spoke of the Soul in the Immaculate Conception. Now in 1950 its language is about the Body: The Mystical Body, the Eucharist, and the Assumption. With deft dogmatic strokes the Church is repeating Paul's truth to another pagan age: "Your bodies are meant for the Lord." There is nothing in a body to beget despair. Man is related to Nothingness, as the Philosophers of Decadentism teach, but only in his origin, not in his destiny. They put Nothingness as the end; the Church puts it at the beginning, for man was created *ex nihilo*. The modern man gets back to nothingness through despair; the Christian knows nothingness only through self-negation, which is humility. The more the pagan "nothings" himself, the closer he gets to the hell of despair and suicide. The more the Christian "nothings" himself, the closer he gets to God. Mary went so much into Nothingness that she became exalted. *Respexit humilitatem ancillae suae*. And her exaltation was her assumption.

**Coming back to the beginning . . . Eros and Thanatos, Sex and Death**, said Freud, are related. They are in this sense: **Eros** as egotistic love leads to the death of the soul. But the world need not live under that curse. The Assumption gives **Eros** a new meaning. Love does lead to death. Where there is love, there is self-forgetfulness, and the maximum in self-forgetfulness is the surrender of life. "Greater love than this no man hath, that he lay down his life for his friend." Our Lord's love led to His death. Mary's love led to her transfixion with seven swords. Greater love than this no woman hath, that she stand beneath the cross of her Son to share in her way in the redemption of the world.

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Within three decades the definition of the Assumption will cure the pessimism and despair of the modern world. Freud, who did so much to develop this pessimism, took as his motto: "If I can not move the Gods on high, I shall set all hell in an uproar." That which he created will now be stilled by a Lady as powerful as an "army drawn up in battle array." The age of the "body beautiful" will now become the age of the Assumption. To that daughter of the ancient Eve, will now go up the prayer of Thompson:

**"The celestial traitress play  
And all mankind to bliss betray;  
With sacrosanct cajoleries  
And starry treachery of your eyes,  
Tempt us back to Paradise!  
Make heavenly trespass;—ay, press in  
Where faint the fledge-foot seraphin,  
Blest fool! Be ensign of our wars,  
And shame us all to warriors!  
Unbanner your bright locks,—advance,  
Girl, their gilded puissance  
I' the mystic vaward, and draw on  
After the lovely gonfalon  
Us to out-foolly the excess  
Of your sweet foolhardiness;  
To adventure like intense  
Assault against Omnipotence!"**



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