



**Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
& Farewell for Emeritus Vice-Chancellor Prof Celia Hammond**

**Homily**

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Archbishop of Perth**

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The University of Notre Dame, Fremantle**

Today the Church throughout the world gathers to celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary. As a living expression of the Church it is good that the community of Notre Dame University also gathers in unity with our brothers and sisters everywhere to celebrate this great feast, especially during Founders Week, when we recall the original inspiration to name the University of Notre Dame in Indiana after the Mother of God. We are the inheritors of that tradition.

The Solemnity of the Assumption is one of the great feasts of the Church, so much so that it is one of the few Holy Days of Obligation still in the Australian liturgical calendar. Like all the Marian feasts scattered throughout the year, this feast is an invitation to all of us to reflect on the person of Mary, the role she played in the coming of Jesus among us, and indeed the role she continues to play as one who in some mysterious fashion continues to bring Jesus to us and to bring us to him.

The Church's teachings about Mary really rest upon what we find in the Scriptures, especially the gospels, and just how the Holy Spirit has led the Church into a deeper understanding of these scriptures over the centuries. While the specific references to Mary in the New Testament are few, they are rich in significance and have been reflected and meditated upon throughout the Church's long life. This prayerful reflection has led the Church to a profound certainty, a belief grounded in faith, which comes to expression in four great Church teachings. We are the inheritors, and the custodians, of this treasure.

First of all we speak of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. This belief sheds some light on the mysterious unfolding of God's plan and the way in which Mary, from the first moment of her existence, is caught up in this mystery. In a unique way Mary is kept free from sin by God's grace so that, when the time came for her to give her response to God's invitation to her to be the mother of the Messiah, a response which was given by her in our name and on our behalf, she could give that response fully and freely, without the burden of sin that might have held her back. *Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let God's will be done in my life.*

We speak, too, of Mary as the Mother of God. In doing so we are reminded that Jesus, the one of whom she is the mother, is both human and divine. Jesus cannot be divided into his divine part and his human part. He is one person, both from God and from Mary, and because he is the one person,



human and divine, Mary is his mother – the mother of the one who is our Emmanuel - God among us. In her motherhood, Mary points beyond herself to the mystery of the uniqueness of her Son. And of course this is her role – to lead us more deeply into the mystery of Jesus.

In a challenging way the Church also speaks of Mary as always a virgin. This, too, points to the uniqueness of her Son. Jesus is one of us, yes, for he has a mother just as we all do, but he also comes totally as a gift from beyond – there is nothing in our human story that alone could bring forth the wonderful gift that Jesus is; he is uniquely God's gift. He is in fact God giving himself to us. And then, when Mary comes to understand that the Lord is asking of her that she give herself to him in this unique way, she does so with a generous faith, just as all of us are called to respond with the same generosity to whatever it is God asks of us. Mary's virginity is about *her* generous yes to God. God may well ask different things of us – but our response can be modeled on her generosity.

All of these remarkable beliefs about Mary help us to understand the mystery which we celebrate today – Mary's assumption into heaven. United with Jesus so closely in his life Mary too is united with him in the mystery of his death and resurrection. In celebrating the feast of the Assumption we are celebrating the fact that Mary has entered joyfully and fully into the mystery of her son's resurrection. In this she becomes, in communion with Jesus, the first of many sisters and brothers whose company we hope to share. And because of this communion in him and with him she is present to us, for where he is she is too. In him, and because of him, she cares for us, prays for us, and supports and encourages us with her presence. The Church captures all of this when it speaks of Mary as the Mother of Jesus and therefore, in him, the mother of us all, the Mother of the Church.

These things we say about Mary are remarkable things to say about a person: that she was always free from sin, that she gave birth to the one who was and is God among us, that she bore a child and yet remained a virgin, and that she was taken body and soul into the glory of heaven. They may sound like dry doctrines, teachings that make no sense today or have little to say to us in our daily lives. In fact, of course, they are the exact opposite. They are windows into what can be set free in a person's life if he or she is willing to believe, willing to take the risk of faith, willing to say "yes" to God.

In today's Gospel, we find Elizabeth saying to Mary, "*Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.*" Here is Mary's secret – she believed, which is to say, she trusted. The gospels make it clear that this was not for Mary, as it is not for us, an easy option. God stepped into her life at the Annunciation and turned everything upside down – but she trusted. The prophet Simeon told her in the Temple that a sword would pierce her heart – that she would have to suffer a great deal – but she trusted. She had to watch her Son set out on a life journey that she knew would bring him great challenges and difficulty - and she didn't always understand – but she trusted. She was rebuffed by Jesus at Cana when she told him about the lack of wine at the wedding – he asked her what that had to do with him or with her – but still she trusted. She walked with Jesus to Calvary and stood at the foot of the cross when most of his disciples deserted him. Her heart would have been breaking – and yet we can believe that even here she trusted. The Gospels show her to us as a woman of extraordinary faith, extraordinary trust – and in this she becomes the great model of discipleship –



for her Son, too, was a man of great trust – even when trust seemed nothing but wild foolishness: *Father*, he could say as he faced his terrible death, *into your hands I entrust my spirit*.

In celebrating the Assumption of Mary we might say that we are celebrating the confirmation of Mary's trust. She put her hope in God, and God did not abandon her. And as today's preface in the Mass will say, she has become for us a sign of hope and comfort as we go on our pilgrim way. As God was faithful to Mary so will God be faithful to us.

We couldn't do better today than to ask Mary to pray for us, and for our University, that God will give to this community, to all of us, something of her faith, something of her trust, something of her generous spirit and her willingness to say "yes" to all that God asks.