

Homily by Bishop Blase Cupich  
Solemnity of the Assumption  
Farewell Mass, August 15, 2010  
Our Lady of Perpetual Help Cathedral

Believe me, scheduling my farewell celebration on a feast that marks Mary's departure from this life to heaven was mere happenstance. Do not get me wrong. Eastern Washington is stunningly beautiful, and in fact, I had a chance ten days ago to tour my new diocese and saw firsthand the rolling sea of wheat fields in the Palouse region, forested mountains dotted with lakes just north of Spokane and some spectacular wide sky sunsets. But, after twelve years here in western South Dakota, I thought I was already in heaven.

And, while this feast of Mary's Assumption into heaven may not be a metaphor for my move to the state of Washington, it does have much to say about the common discipleship of Jesus we share with her. In fact, if we look at how the readings fit together, it becomes clear that Mary is presented on this feast as the paradigm, the model for how all who belong to Christ are to live in this passing world.

We see this first of all in what St. Paul says in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

*In Christ, who has been risen from the dead, all shall be brought to life, but each one in proper order: Christ the first fruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ.*

The message is obvious. While Mary takes center stage on this feast day, Paul's insight reminds us that she is more than the one whom the poet Wordsworth calls "our tainted nature's solitary boast." She is also the first of all those belonging to Christ who live in the promise of being taken up into heaven by the power of His resurrection. Yes, Mary is unique in that she is the first in this proper order, but it is an order that includes us, who also belong to Christ.

We should also notice that the texts from Revelations and the Gospel of Luke both portray Mary as a woman on a journey, on the way. Centuries before the word *Christianity* was coined, the disciples of Jesus spoke of belonging to *The Way* to describe their new life. All of this, then, should move us to take a closer look at how Mary takes up the journey of the discipleship we share with her.

While the occasion of my farewell might suggest that I highlight the top ten things we accomplished or the top ten mistakes I made, both of which you know already, it occurs to me that we can never go wrong preaching the Gospel message as it is given to us. As I see it, how Mary takes up *The Way* is where the emphasis should be, as it is so instructive to us.

Notice that her journey begins not by her own impulse. Instead, she is sent into the world for God's purpose. Her life is not an accident, a whim of nature, due to human urges and desires, or even worse, a mistake or an aimless wandering. Rather, as she is sent from heaven, the Ark of the Covenant can be seen, telling us she comes forth with the same intention and purpose God had in making a covenant with His people. She is important for God to achieve all he ever planned and promised.

She is also sent with the fullness of all God's graces for the journey. That is how we are to read her appearance: She is clothed with the sun, the moon is under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars rests on her head. All of this communicates that she is precious to God and cherished by God, and also that she is given all the necessary spiritual, heavenly and worldly resources of grace for the journey.

Being sent into the world for God's purpose and relying on God's graces is precisely how we should approach our lives in this passing world as well. That attitude stands in marked contrast to the one sold to us in the market place, namely that we have to prove the worth of our existence, make our own happiness based on the value system of the age: appearance or fame, wealth or health. Failure to do so relegates us to a meaningless, unimportant and marginalized life as far as the world judges. Many people are manipulated by this bleak message in our day that human life is aimless, something Henry David Thoreau noticed when he remarked that "that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

But this is not how Mary and those who belong to Christ with her see themselves as coming into the world. No, we are sent into the world for His purpose, His work, a work and purpose unique to each of us and for which he graces us. Cardinal Newman, who will be beatified next month by Pope Benedict XVI in Birmingham, England, has a beautiful reflection on this:

*God has created everything for its own good. What is good for one is not the good of another; what makes one man happy would make another unhappy... There is no rule about what is happy and good, what suits one would not suit another. He knows what I can do, what I can best be, what is my greatest happiness and He means to give it to me.*

We should also take note how Mary's journey has a particular and determined trajectory. The first reading from Revelations recounts that after the woman gives birth to the Anointed One, the Christ, she is pursued by an enormous dragon, an ominous flaming red creature, with seven heads and ten horns. Yet, fear does not determine the direction of her life. Rather, we read in the Gospel, which reports how she continues her journey, that Mary takes the high road, going up into the heights. She does so to be with and to ease the burden of her elderly expectant kinswoman, Elizabeth.

Mary's journey is not determined by fear, anxiety, the drive to prove or protect herself, but by love and concern, setting her sights on the task of calling the best out of another. Is that not how we are to understand Luke's description that the very sound of Mary's voice makes the Elizabeth's child leap in her womb? Has she not continued to do that over the ages, lifting us up, sustaining us in our moments of need, to the point that all generations, like Elizabeth, call her blessed?

We are to see our discipleship in a similar way. It is a journey of service, not a flight in fear. The world is filled with anxiety and apprehension these days. There is a good deal of worry, unease and fretfulness due to the economic situation, the threat of terrorism and so many other factors that can have a paralyzing impact on moving ahead. Mary simply reminds us to take the high road of care and concern for others, to draw the best out of each other and to reject selfish and divisive approaches that neglect others out of the fear that helping and caring for them impoverishes us.

Finally, we see that Mary comes to the end of her journey, which is described as returning home. Home is the place from which she left. Throughout her journey she kept fresh her longing to return there to live with God, who sent her into the world. That is her true home and ours, as well.

Feast days like the one today can benefit us greatly by re-centering our lives as disciples of Jesus. What we hear of Mary on this day offers a helpful corrective to the approach so prominent in the world today; that human life is meaningless, an aimless and fearful wandering, with no hope of happiness beyond what we make for ourselves through accumulating fame, fortune and fun. The example of Mary offers that needed corrective. But, I have come to see over these past twelve years of serving the Catholic community in western South Dakota that, as important as the witness of Our Lady is for encouraging us to take up *The Way* each and every day, so too, is the witness we give to each other.

The word "bishop" comes from the Greek word *episcopos*, which literally means *overseer*. While there is an aspect of overseeing a community that involves correcting and warning of threats, an overseer also has to name and point out how the Spirit of Christ is active and working through people in a community.

Time and again, as your overseer, I have seen in so many of you much of what we find in Mary. Through the countless ways you have shown respect for and defended the dignity of human life, whether that be speaking on behalf of the child in the womb, the immigrant struggling to feed his family, the neglected in society, the prisoner on death row, you have given witness to your belief that we all come from God and are children of God, sent into the world to achieve His purpose. I have also seen how that same respect for the dignity of others has given you the patience to avoid harsh language and divisive tactics in responding to those who do not agree with us on such issues.

I have also seen: many of you approach the sometimes daunting tasks of raising and educating children in an increasingly complex world with real hope and confidence; parents who sacrifice so much for their children, knowing that they are doing God's work; teachers who join parents in calling the best out of their students, oftentimes with little or no recognition. And I have seen our priests keep moving forward against a tide of resistance and the obstacles that too many of the Church's leaders have caused in these past few years by the neglect of their obligation to protect children. In all of these, I have seen what it means for those who belong to Christ to take up *The Way* of service in hope, as did Mary, the first in the order of Jesus' disciples.

And if you would allow me just one final piece of guidance and counsel as I end my service as your shepherd, it would be this: Keep fresh in your hearts the longing for the home from which God has sent you. Keep fresh the longing for heaven. While these times present some unique economic and financial challenges, we have to admit that there is an enormous abundance of material goods at our disposal. We can become enamored and enticed by them to the point that we allow a bit of spiritual amnesia about our true home to overtake us.

Mary's journey, as we have seen today, was stretched tight between the two poles of leaving and returning home. It never fails. Whenever we forget from where we came, we tend to have less respect for ourselves and others and we lose our way. Whenever we lose sight of our real home, we tend to make this passing world our home, and easily convince ourselves that sharing and caring for others is at best secondary, elective and purely discretionary, especially if such sharing costs us some of our comfort.

Keeping our journey in this life taut between the faith and vision that we have been sent into the world fully graced by God to do His work and the hope and promise that, like Mary, we will be taken up into heaven by the power of Christ's resurrection, is the key to ensuring that we will be the loving disciples Jesus calls us to be.

I know this is true, because I have seen it happen so often here. Maybe that is why I have always considered my time with you a touch of heaven.