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)