



THE ASSUMPTION OF OUR LADY IN THE EARLIEST SOURCES

From the definition of 1950 back to Sacred Scripture itself

A CATHOLIC TAKE WITH JOE McCLANE · THE STATION OF THE CROSS CATHOLIC MEDIA NETWORK

Every August, like clockwork, somebody lobbs it over the wall like a grenade: “The Assumption? Your church invented that in 1950.”

It is a fair challenge, and it deserves a straight answer — so here is mine. This sheet runs backwards: from the definition, back through the Fathers, past the oldest surviving accounts, all the way to Sacred Scripture. I will tell you plainly where the evidence is strong and where it is thin, because I have no interest in overselling anything to you. The truth stands up fine on its own, and every citation here can be checked.

I. THE DEFINITION — 1 NOVEMBER 1950

Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution Munificentissimus Deus

Let us begin at the end, since that is where the objection lives.

“By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”

MUNIFICENTISSIMUS DEUS §44 · VATICAN.VA

Now notice two things with me. First, this is the only solemn ex cathedra definition any pope has issued since the First Vatican Council defined papal infallibility in 1870. One exercise of that power in more than a century and a half — and it was about Our Lady.

Second — and this is the part almost nobody knows — Pius XII never claims to have turned up an ancient proof text. He says the opposite: the Fathers who preached this feast were not inventing a doctrine at all.

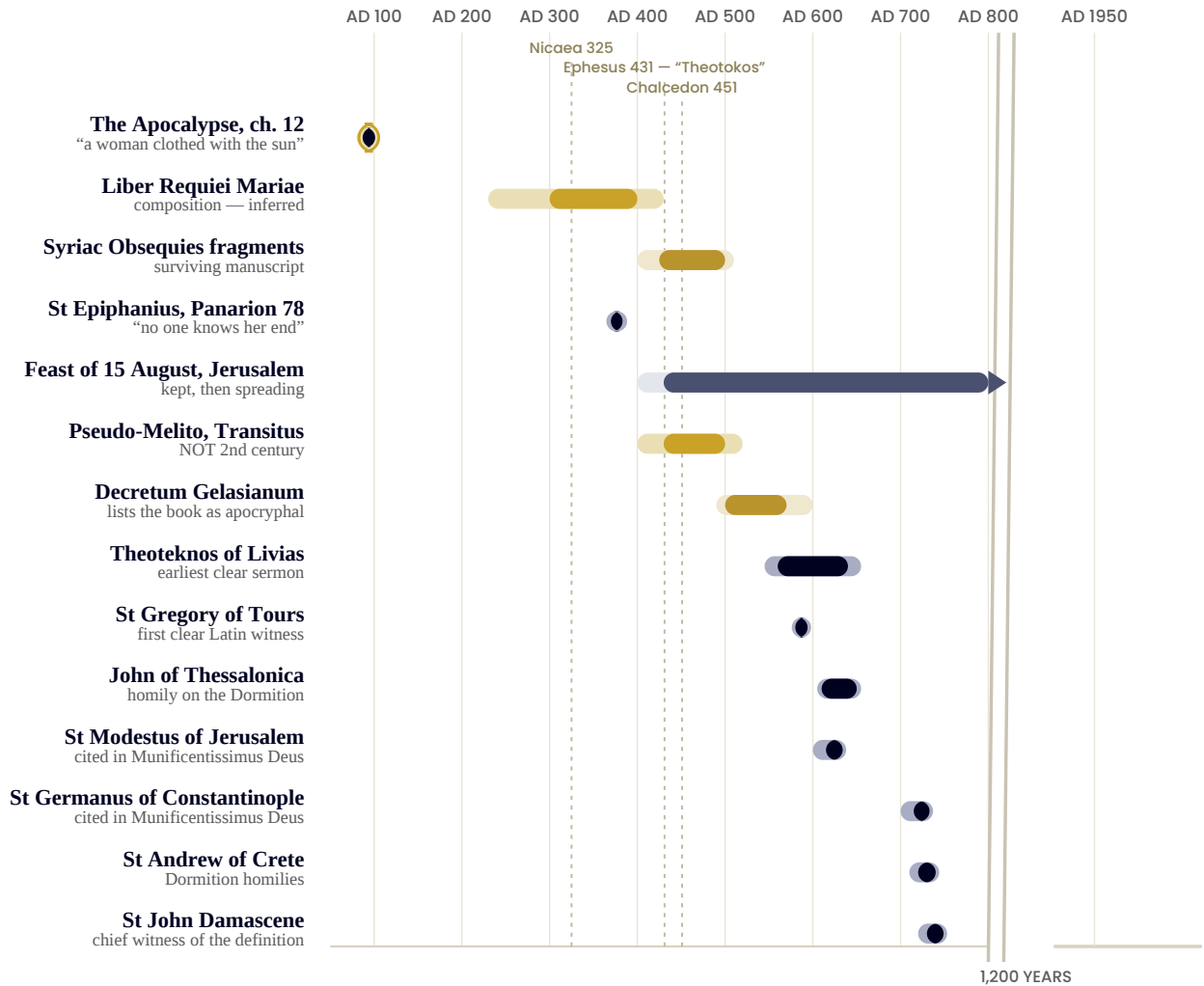
“...they did not draw their teaching from the feast itself as from a primary source, but rather they spoke of this doctrine as something already known and accepted by Christ’s faithful.”

MUNIFICENTISSIMUS DEUS §20

That is the Church’s own account of her own reasoning, and it sets the terms for everything below. The question was never “where is the first-century citation?” It is how far back the belief itself goes. So let us go and find out.

THE WHOLE STORY IN ONE VIEW

Where every one of these sources actually falls in time



MUNIFICENTISSIMUS DEUS
the dogma defined by Pius XII

1950

Legend: Sacred Scripture (dark blue), Apocryphal narratives (yellow), Fathers & Church writers (dark blue), Manuscripts & decrees (yellow), Liturgy (dark blue). Pale extensions show the range scholars allow; the solid core is the best estimate. Council dates are given for orientation.

Read the shape of it with me. Every source on this page sits inside the first eight Christian centuries, and they arrive in exactly the order you would expect: first Sacred Scripture, then the narratives, then the manuscripts, then the feast, and then the preaching of the Fathers. The definition does not come for another twelve hundred years.

And that gap is the argument, not the problem. The Church did not spend twelve centuries inventing this. She spent twelve centuries believing it while nobody of consequence bothered to dispute it — and a doctrine nobody is attacking is a doctrine nobody needs to define. Rome defines when something is denied, not when it is quietly held by everybody.

II. THE SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION — c. AD 95

The Book of Revelation, chapter 12

Before a single Father put pen to paper, and long before any of the ancient accounts we are about to examine, there is Scripture. St. John, exiled on Patmos, is shown a sign in heaven:

“And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”

REVELATION 12:1 (RSVCE)

And John tells us who she is four verses later. This woman “brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” — and there is only one Child in the whole of Scripture who answers to that description. The mother of Christ is Mary.

Now look at where she is. She is not in a tomb. She is in heaven — crowned, robed in the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, described in bodily terms and in glory. This is the Assumption seen from the far side: not the leaving of earth, but the arrival. And the Church has read it that way all along. Pius XII says so in the very document that defines the dogma:

“...the scholastic Doctors have recognized the Assumption of the Virgin Mother of God as something signified, not only in various figures of the Old Testament, but also in that woman clothed with the sun whom John the Apostle contemplated on the Island of Patmos.”

MUNIFICENTISSIMUS DEUS §27, CITING REVELATION 12:1

There is a second thread running through this chapter, and I love this one. The chapter divisions in our Bibles are medieval, not apostolic — so read straight through the seam and hear what comes immediately before the vision of the Woman: “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple” (Rev. 11:19). John sees the Ark, and then he sees the Woman. The Fathers and the Doctors drew that same line. The Ark — overlaid with incorruptible gold, carrying the word of God — is a figure of Our Lady’s body, which carried the Word Himself and was likewise kept from corruption. Munificentissimus Deus §26 quotes the psalm straight out: “Arise, O Lord, into your resting place: you and the ark, which you have sanctified.”

I walked both of these threads at some length in *Catholic by Design*, and I am not going to say it worse the second time around. Here is how I put it there — first the crown, which belongs to an office, and then the Ark, which accounts for a body:

“Gabriel answers before the King draws breath, hailing Mary as ‘full of grace’ and announcing to her the throne of David (Lk. 1:28–33); John sees her crowned with twelve stars in Revelation 12; and at Cana she intercedes — ‘They have no wine’ — and the King does not refuse her. Seen this way, not as pious sentiment but as a constitutional office written into the Davidic kingdom, the great Marian doctrines stop looking like medieval additions and start looking like structural logic: the Queen Mother of an eternal King, prepared for her throne and assumed to it.”

CATHOLIC BY DESIGN, CH. 7 — ‘SON OF GOD, SON OF DAVID’, P. 84

“The dragon cannot catch her. He cannot defile her. He cannot claim her. She has nothing in common with him — total and complete enmity. She is the Ark of the New Covenant (cf. Rev. 11:19), clothed in the glory of God, her soul magnifying the Lord as the moon reflects the light of the sun, piercing through the darkness of the night.”

CATHOLIC BY DESIGN, CH. 12 — ‘THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD’, P. 137

A WORD ABOUT THE DATE

St. Irenaeus, writing around the year 180 and only two generations removed from the Apostle himself, tells us the vision was seen “towards the end of the reign of Domitian.” That puts the Book of Revelation at roughly AD 95. This is not a modern reconstruction and it is not an argument from internal evidence — it is a first-century apostolic text, and by a very wide margin it is the oldest source on this sheet.

“HOLD ON — THAT WOMAN IS THE CHURCH, NOT MARY.”

You will hear that one, so let us handle it now. And the answer is: yes, she is. Catholic tradition has always read that woman in more than one sense at once — as Israel, as the Church, and as Our Lady — because Mary is both the archetype and the mother of the Church, and what is said of the one is fittingly said of the other. So “the woman is the Church” does not overturn the Marian reading. It names one of its senses.

And no, this chapter is not a proof standing all by itself. We read it the way the Church reads all of Scripture — in light of the verse before and after it, the chapter, the book, the testament, the Bible as a whole, and the lived teaching of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Read that way, it is the ground everything else on this sheet stands on.

III. BEFORE THE FATHERS — THE OLDEST NARRATIVES

Ancient accounts, third to fifth century

Liber Requiei Mariae — The Book of Mary’s Repose

Now we come to the oldest surviving account of the end of Our Lady’s life, and I want to walk carefully here, because this is exactly where a lot of well-meaning Catholics get themselves into trouble.

It was composed in Greek — that original is lost to us — and it survives complete only in an Ethiopic translation, with fragments in Syriac, Georgian, Coptic and Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Nobody knows who wrote it. The place is most likely Palestine; the story moves through Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives and the Kidron Valley. Stephen Shoemaker, who is the leading scholar of this literature and writes as a historian rather than as anybody’s apologist, judges that narratives of this family “most likely were composed by the third century at the latest.”

The Assumption turns up in the opening lines, when the angel tells Our Lady what the apostles are going to witness:

“...they will see your glory and will not depart from you until they bring you to where you were before.”

LIBER REQUIEI §1 · TRANS. SHOEMAKER, ANCIENT TRADITIONS (OUP 2002), P. 290

And it is narrated outright at section 89 — the body borne up on the clouds, and the soul restored to it in Paradise:

“Let them bring the body of Mary into the clouds.” ... “And when they arrived together in Paradise, they placed Mary’s body beside the tree of life. And they brought her soul and placed it in her body.”

LIBER REQUIEI §89 · TRANS. SHOEMAKER, P. 340

A NECESSARY WORD ABOUT THIS TEXT

I am not going to hand you something and then let you get ambushed with it. The Liber Requiei is an apocryphon — it is not Scripture and it is not a Father. Alongside the Assumption it carries material no Catholic should touch: a ‘great angel’ who hands Mary a book of secret mysteries, a hidden prayer for the soul’s ascent past the powers, and episodes of violence against the Jews. Shoemaker argues that those very features point to contact with gnostic Christianity — and that is precisely why he dates the thing so early.

So use it for one thing and one thing only: as evidence that the belief is ancient. The Church kept the belief and set the book aside. That is not a weakness in our case. That is the Church doing exactly what she was given the authority to do.

The Syriac Obsequies of My Lady Mary

The same work again, in a Syriac translation made independently of the Ethiopic. Palimpsest fragments in the British Library (Add. 17137) are written in an elegant Estrangela hand dated to roughly the fifth century — among the oldest physical witnesses to this tradition anywhere in the world. And let me be straight with you: those particular leaves preserve sections 98–104, which fall after the assumption scene itself.

ED. CHRISTA MÜLLER-KESSLER, HUGOYE 23 (2020) — FREE ONLINE. EARLIER ED. WILLIAM WRIGHT, CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE APOCRYPHAL LITERATURE (1865), PUBLIC DOMAIN.

TWO MISTAKES I DO NOT WANT YOU MAKING

1. Do not call the *Transitus of Melito of Sardis* a second-century text. The work circulating under his name is pseudonymous and probably fifth century. It is the most common over-claim in popular apologetics and it is the easiest one in the world for a critic to knock down. Leave it alone.
2. Get out in front of the Gelasian objection. Somebody will point out that an old list of apocryphal books includes “*Liber qui appellatur Transitus, id est Assumptio sanctae Mariae*.” Two answers. That document declares books non-canonical; it does not condemn doctrines — the Church treats 1 Enoch as apocryphal too, and St. Jude quotes it right there in the New Testament. And it is most likely not Pope Gelasius’ work at all, but a sixth-century Italian or Gallic compilation.

IV. THE FOURTH CENTURY — ST. EPIPHANIUS OF SALAMIS

Panarion 78, written c. 375–377

Here is where I have to be straight with you again, because this is the one a sharp Protestant brother will bring up, and I would rather you heard it from me first.

St. Epiphanius is the earliest Father to take up the question of how Our Lady’s life ended — and he tells us flatly that he does not know:

*One cannot find “Mary’s death, nor whether or not she died, nor whether or not she was buried.” ...
“No one knows her end.”*

ST. EPIPHANIUS, PANARION 78 · TRANS. FRANK WILLIAMS (BRILL)

He lays out three possibilities — that she died and was buried in honor, that she was martyred, or that she never died at all — and he declines to choose between them. Elsewhere in the same discussion he compares her to Elijah, “taken up, but has not seen death.”

WHY EPIPHANIUS HELPS US RATHER THAN HURTS US

You will find Catholic writers who take that Elijah line and wave it around as proof that Epiphanius believed in the Assumption. Please do not do it. Read in context, he is listing possibilities because he does not know, and he says exactly that in the same breath. Claim him as a positive witness and you have handed the other fellow a very easy correction.

The honest reading is the stronger one anyway. Epiphanius shows us that the question was live and unsettled in the 370s — which means the consensus that came afterward was not manufactured out of thin air. It had something real to converge upon. Praise be to God for honest witnesses.

V. THE FIFTH CENTURY — JERUSALEM IS ALREADY KEEPING THE DAY

Liturgy and archaeology in the Holy Land

Before the Fathers preach it, the Church is already keeping it — and that matters enormously, because the liturgy is where the faith of the Church lives long before anybody sits down to write it out. The earliest center of Marian devotion in Palestine was the Kathisma church, a focus of Marian piety by the early fifth century. Soon after, the traditional site of Our Lady’s Tomb outside the Jerusalem walls became a second center, and in the sixth century Justinian added the Nea.

And here is the detail I want you to carry into the feast with you: the earliest feast of Our Lady in Palestine was the fifteenth of August — kept at first as a celebration of her part in the Nativity, and only later growing into the commemoration of her Dormition and Assumption. By the seventh century it had spread across several days of mid-August liturgy joining all three Jerusalem shrines together. The date is older than what we now keep on it.

SHOEMAKER, ANCIENT TRADITIONS, CH. 2 — THE ANCIENT PALESTINIAN CULT OF THE VIRGIN.

VI. THE SIXTH CENTURY — THE FATHERS BEGIN TO PREACH IT

The first clear sermons, East and West

Theoteknos, Bishop of Livias (Palestine, c. 550–650)

This is the earliest surviving sermon that plainly teaches the bodily Assumption — and watch how he handles it. He does not argue for it as though it were news. He preaches it as something his people already hold, which is precisely what Munificentissimus Deus §20 told us to expect:

“...even though the God-bearing body of that holy one did taste death, it was not corrupted; for it was kept incorrupt and free of decay, and it was lifted up to heaven with her pure and spotless soul by the holy archangels and powers.”

THEOTEKNOS, ENCOMIUM ON THE ASSUMPTION §4

Then he argues it the way the Fathers always loved to argue — from the lesser to the greater:

“For if Enoch, who pleased God, was taken up ‘that he might never see death’ ... how much more would God have taken up the soul of her whom he had made one body with divine grace...”

THEOTEKNOS §4

And then he names the day:

“The assumption of the body of the holy one, and her ascension to heaven, took place on the fifteenth day of August.”

THEOTEKNOS §5 · TRANS. BRIAN E. DALEY SJ, ON THE DORMITION OF MARY: EARLY PATRISTIC HOMILIES (ST. VLADIMIR’S SEMINARY PRESS, 1998), PP. 71–81

St. Gregory of Tours (d. 594) · Glory of the Martyrs 4, written 580/594

And now the West. This is the first clear Latin witness we have, and he gives us the whole doctrine in five lines:

“And behold, the Lord Jesus came with his angels, and after taking her soul he gave it to the angel Michael and left. At dawn the apostles lifted her body on a bed, placed it in a tomb, and kept guard over it, in anticipation of the arrival of the Lord. And behold, again the Lord approached them. He took the holy body in a cloud and ordered it to be brought to Paradise, where, after regaining her soul, Mary now rejoices with his elect and enjoys the goodness of eternity that will never perish.”

ST. GREGORY OF TOURS, GLORY OF THE MARTYRS 4 · TRANS. RAYMOND VAN DAM (LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS) · INDEXED AS E00369, OXFORD CULT OF SAINTS DATABASE

VII. AND THEN THE GREAT ONES — SEVENTH AND EIGHTH CENTURIES

The witnesses Pius XII actually quotes

St. Modestus of Jerusalem (d. 634), St. Germanus of Constantinople (d. 733), St. Andrew of Crete (d. c. 740), and St. John Damascene (d. 749). These are the Fathers Munificentissimus Deus names and quotes — and Damascene is its principal witness. Listen to him, because he preaches the way the whole Tradition reasons about Our Lady:

“It was fitting that she, who had kept her virginity intact in childbirth, should keep her own body free from all corruption even after death.”

ST. JOHN DAMASCENE, ENCOMIUM IN DORMITIONEM, HOM. II, N. 14 · QUOTED AT MUNIFICENTISSIMUS DEUS §21

VIII. SO WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN THEY COME AT YOU?

Say this. The Church did not define the Assumption in 1950 because she had just turned up a first-century document in somebody’s archive. She defined it because she had believed it, prayed it, and kept the feast for fifteen hundred years — and because in all that time, nobody, anywhere, ever had a body.

Sit with that a moment. Every apostle has relics. Every great martyr has relics. Cities fought over bones; religious orders went to law over them. And the Mother of God — the most venerated woman in the history of the world — has an empty tomb in Jerusalem, an empty tomb in Ephesus, and not one relic in between.

Now be honest about the shape of that argument, and say it out loud before the other fellow can: it is an argument from silence. Concede it openly and it loses none of its force. In a Church that collected relics the way this one did, that kind of silence is not the absence of evidence. It is the evidence.

IX. GO AND READ THEM YOURSELF

I am no Scripture scholar and I am certainly no patristics man. As I am fond of saying, I am no genius — I am just stealing from geniuses. So here is exactly where I stole from, and you can go check every word of it:

- Pope Pius XII, Munificentissimus Deus (1950) — the full English text with footnotes, free at vatican.va. Sections 17–22, 26–27 and 39 carry the whole patristic dossier.
- Stephen J. Shoemaker, Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption (Oxford, 2002) — the standard critical study. The entire book is free and openly licensed at library.oapen.org (handle 20.500.12657/85761). The Liber Requiei translation runs pp. 290–350.

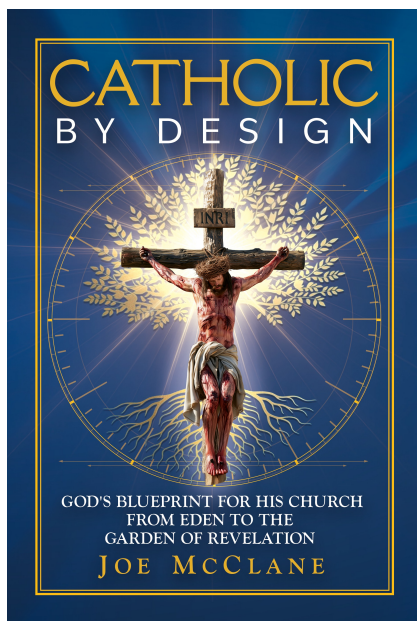
- Brian E. Daley SJ, *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998) — Theoteknos, John of Thessalonica, Modestus, Germanus, Andrew of Crete and John Damascene, all in one volume. If you buy one book off this list, buy this one.
- St. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, trans. Frank Williams (Brill) — and read the whole of Book 78, not somebody's excerpt.
- St. Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs*, trans. Raymond Van Dam (Liverpool University Press).

So go to Mass on the fifteenth if you can get there. Not because you are bound to — here in the United States this year the feast falls on a Saturday, and the obligation is lifted — but because the obligation was never the reason any of us went in the first place. Our Lady is in heaven, body and soul, and the Church has known it a very long time.

God love you.

— Joe McClane

Where the scholars disagree, I have told you so rather than picking whichever answer helped me most. Share this with anyone you like.



If this is the kind of thing that lights you up...

CATHOLIC BY DESIGN

God's Blueprint for His Church from Eden to the Garden of Revelation

You have just watched a doctrine come into focus across fifteen centuries — kept in the liturgy before it was ever preached, and preached long before it was defined. That is how God builds.

That is the whole argument of this book. I follow one golden thread from the first page of Genesis to the last page of Revelation, and I make a bold claim: the Catholic Church is not a human institution that evolved over the centuries. She is the eternal design of God — woven into creation from the moment He formed Adam out of the dust, unfolding covenant by covenant until she reaches her fullness in Jesus Christ.

Adam. Noah. Abraham. Moses. David. Covenant by covenant, God was building one thing the whole time — a family, a kingdom, a Church. The priesthood, the sacraments, the office of Peter, the Queen Mother, and the mission to every nation. None of it was invented by men.

CATHOLIC BY DESIGN

by Joe McClane · available now in paperback and on Kindle

Find it on Amazon · joemcclane.com

And if the last things have been on your mind this August, my next book, *He Is Coming*, is in production now — along with the documentary of the same name.

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