

Who Is the Woman Clothed with the Sun?

By Fr. William Saunders

During the Solemnity of the Assumption we had a reading from the Book of Revelation that mentioned a lady clothed with the sun, a child and a dragon. Does the lady refer to the Blessed Mother?

First, let's refresh our memories with the passage from the Book of Revelation (11:19-12:6):

"Then God's temple in heaven opened and in the temple could be seen the Ark of the Covenant. There were flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, an earthquake and a violent hailstorm. A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Because she was with child, she wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky: it was a huge dragon, flaming red, with seven heads and ten horns; on his heads were seven diadems. His tail swept a third of the stars from the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, ready to devour her child when it should be born. She gave birth to a son — a boy destined to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and to His throne. The woman herself fled into the desert, where a special place had been prepared for her by God; there she was taken care of for 1260 days."

Since the time of the early Church Fathers, this image of *"the woman clothed with the sun"* has had a threefold symbolism: the ancient people of Israel, the Church and the Blessed Mother. Regarding the ancient people of Israel, Isaiah described Israel as follows: *"As a woman about to give birth*

writhes and cries out in her pains, so were we in your presence, O Lord" (Is 26:17). Of course, one must remember too that it is from the ancient people of Israel that both Mary and the Messiah came.

The *"woman clothed with the sun"* may also represent the Church. Later in verse 17, we read, *"Enraged at her escape, the dragon went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep God's commandments and give witness to Jesus,"* the *"offspring"* being the baptized children of God, the members of the Church. Pope St. Gregory posited, *"The sun stands for the light of truth, and the moon for the transitoriness of temporal things; the holy Church is clothed like the sun because she is protected by the splendor of supernatural truth, and she has the moon under her feet because she is above all earthly things"* (Moralia, 34, 12).

Finally, the woman can be identified with the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary gave birth to our Savior, Jesus Christ. St. Bernard commented, *"The sun contains permanent color and splendor; whereas the moon's brightness is unpredictable and changeable, for it never stays the same. It is quite right, then, for Mary to be depicted as clothed with the sun, for she entered the profundity of divine wisdom much, much further than one can possibly conceive"* (De B. Virgine, 2).

In identifying the image of *"the woman clothed with the sun"* as our Blessed Mother Mary, the fullness of the imagery of the ancient people of Israel and the Church emerges. Consider the ancient people of Israel. When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he declared (as translated in the New American Bible, 1968), *"Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are among women"* (Lk 1:28). Then continuing, he said, *"Do not fear, Mary. You have found favor with God. You*

shall conceive and bear a son and give Him the name Jesus. Great will be His dignity and He will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of David His father. He will rule over the house of Jacob forever and His reign will be without end" (Lk 1:30-33). These statements reflect the prophecy of Zephaniah regarding the ancient people of Israel and the coming of the Messiah: "*Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has removed the judgment against you, He has turned away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord is in your midst, you have no further misfortune to fear. On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: 'Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged!'*" (Zep 3:14-16). Therefore, Mary, the mother of the Messiah, as the "woman clothed with the sun" represents the fulfillment of the prophecy given to the people Israel.

Likewise, Mary, again seen as "*the woman clothed with the sun,*" rightfully represents the Church, for Mary is the Mother of the Church. St. Paul in his Letter to the Galatians asserted, "*...When the designated time had come, God sent forth His Son born of a woman, born under the law, to deliver from the law those who were subject to it, so that we might receive our status as adopted sons*" (4:4-5). Expounding upon this point, the Vatican Council II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), teaches, "At once virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol and the most perfect realization of the Church: "the Church indeed...by receiving the Word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and Baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life" (No. 64). Moreover, the Vatican Council II continued, that in her glorious assumption,

Mary "is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come" (No. 67). Finally, at the end of the third session of Vatican Council II, November 21, 1964, when Lumen Gentium had been promulgated, Pope Paul VI declared, "We proclaim the Most Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of the Church, i.e. of the whole people of God, faithful and pastors, and we call her most loving Mother." Therefore, the Blessed Mother represents the fulfillment of the image of the Church: she who is the mother of the Savior who founded the Church, is a spiritual mother to all who through baptism are the adopted children of God and members of the Church.

Here it is worth citing the teaching of Pope St. Pius X in his encyclical, Ad Diem Illud Laetissimum (1904): "Everyone knows that this woman signified the Virgin Mary...John therefore saw the most Holy Mother of God already in eternal happiness, yet travailing in a mysterious childbirth. What birth was it? Surely it was the birth of us who, still in exile, are yet to be generated to the perfect charity of God, and to eternal happiness" (24).

[Let us continue by] examining other reasons why the woman "clothed with the sun" refers to our Blessed Mother.

Since the time of the early Church Fathers, this image of the woman has had a three-fold symbolism: the ancient people of Israel, the Church and the Blessed Mother.

However, as we learned, the fullness of the image is the Blessed Mother, for she fulfills the prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah, and she is the Mother of the Church.

There are other important reasons for identifying “*the woman clothed with the sun*” as our Blessed Mother. The passage in question began with a revelation of heaven, the temple, and the Ark of the Covenant. Remember in the Old Testament the ark housed the Ten Commandments, the Law of God and God’s Word. The ark also contained the priestly staff of Aaron and a golden jar containing an omerful of manna (Ex 16:32, Nm 17:25, Heb 9:14). As the Israelites journeyed to the Promised Land, a cloud, signifying the presence of God, would descend upon or “*overshadow*” the tent where the ark was kept. Later in the Temple of Jerusalem, the ark was kept in the Holy of Holies, the inner core of the Temple where the Jewish people believed God dwelt.

After the description of heaven, the temple and the ark, the next verse describes “*the woman clothed with the sun.*” Mary is the mother of Jesus, whom she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Archangel Gabriel announced, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God*” (Lk 1:35). The connection between Mary and the Temple, the Holy of Holies and the ark is clear.

Keep in mind also that when St. John saw this vision, the ark had been lost for over 500 years. The prophet Jeremiah had hidden the ark to prevent its capture and desecration by the Babylonians, and declared, “*The place is to remain unknown until God gathers His people together again and shows them His mercy*” (2 Mc 2:7). In this vision, St. John saw the ark and then he saw Mary. Mary carried in her womb our Lord, who is the Word of God, the true High Priest and the Bread of Life. Truly, Mary is the new Ark of the New Covenant, which our

Lord as priest will make with His Blood spilled in the sacrifice of the Cross.

If this “*woman clothed with the sun*” refers to our Blessed Mother, how then do the birth pangs mentioned in Revelation fit? Since she was free of Original Sin through her Immaculate Conception, Mary was free of child-bearing pains. The pain, therefore, must refer to the pain she shared when she stood at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19:25), a pain prophesied by the priest Simeon at the circumcision: “*This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed — and you yourself shall be pierced with a sword — so that the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare*” (Lk 2:34-35). Interestingly, St. Paul also speaks of “*labor pains*” in handing the faith on to his people: “*You are my children, and you put me back in labor pains until Christ is formed in you*” (Gal 4:19). So the pain takes on a spiritual significance, that pain in sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and that pain in being the Mother of the Church and bringing others to her Son.

Mary’s description as “*the woman clothed with the sun*” also depicts her glory fulfilled in her Assumption. Pope Pius XII in *Munificentissimus Deus*, the declaration of the dogma of the Assumption, recognized that the early Church fathers looked to “*the woman clothed with the sun*” when providing the New Testament foundation for the belief (No. 27). Note that that is why the passage in question is read at the Mass for the Solemnity of the Assumption. Moreover, the Second Vatican Council in its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* taught, “*Finally, the Immaculate Virgin preserved free from all stain of Original Sin, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, when her earthly life was over, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, that she might be the more*

fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords (cf. Rv 19:16) *and conqueror of sin and death*” (No. 59). Note that in making this statement, the Second Vatican Council referenced the passage from Revelation in question.

One last point to consider: Pondering our entire exposition of this topic, we can step back and see how our Blessed Mother — her role and her imagery in this passage of Revelation — fulfills the Old Testament. For this reason, the early Church fathers identified Mary as “the New Eve.” In the third chapter of Genesis, the first Eve succumbed to the temptation of wanting to be like a god, disobeyed God’s command and sinned. In contrast, Mary is full of grace, free of all sin. At the Annunciation, she said to Archangel Gabriel, “*I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done according to thy word,*” submitting fully to the will of God (Lk 2:38).

Through the first Eve came death and the closing of the gates of heaven; through Mary came everlasting life won by the saving work of Jesus. While the first Eve is called “the mother of all of the living,” Mary is truly the Mother of all of those living spiritually in the life of grace.

Finally, after the Fall, God said to the serpent, Satan, “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers...*” (Gn 3:15). In Revelation, we find Satan represented by a dragon. The Hebrew word *nahash* used in Genesis means both serpent and dragon. Also, the enmity between Mary and Satan, between her offspring and Satan’s is found in Revelation. The New Eve typology was presented early in the Church by St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, St. Augustine, St. John Damascene, just to name a few, and was also highlighted in Vatican Council II’s *Dogmatic Constitution*

on the Church, Chapter VIII, entitled, “Our Lady.”

Therefore, “*the woman clothed with the sun,*” as depicted in the Book of Revelation, is clearly a beautiful reference to the role of our Blessed Mother in the plan of salvation.

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Fr. Saunders is Pastor of Our Lady of Hope Parish in Potomac Falls and a professor of catechetics and theology at Notre Dame Graduate School in Alexandria.