

## New Liturgical Movement

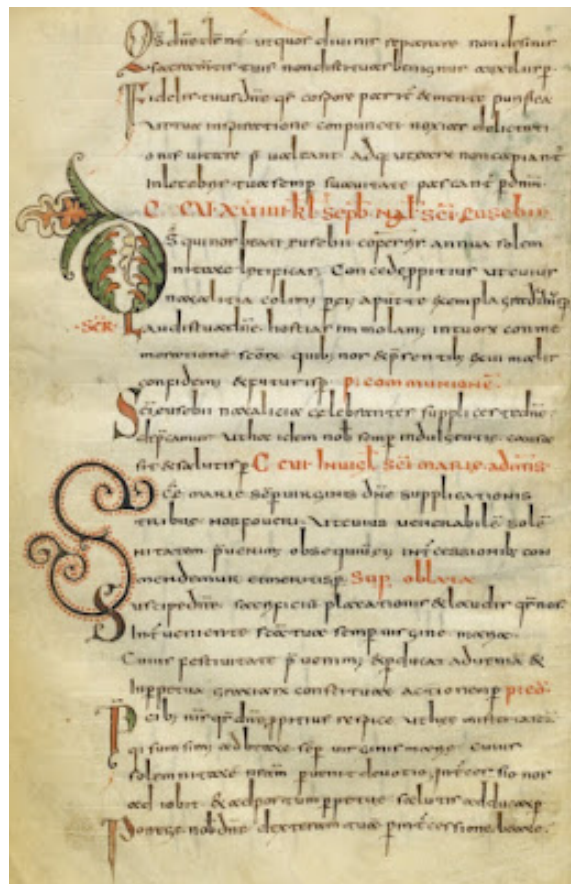
Friday, August 14, 2020

<https://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2020/08/the-vigil-of-assumption.html>

### The Vigil of the Assumption

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In the Roman Rite, the term “vigilia – vigil” traditionally means a penitential day of preparation for a major feast. The Mass of a Saint’s vigil is celebrated after None, as are the Masses of the ferias of Lent or the Ember Days, and in violet vestments; however, the deacon and subdeacon do not wear folded chasubles, as they do in Lent, but the dalmatic and tunicle. The Mass has neither the Gloria nor the Creed, the *Alleluja* is simply omitted before the Gospel, not replaced with a Tract, and *Benedicamus Domino* is said at the end in place of *Ite, missa est*.



Folio 102v of the Gellone Sacramentary, 780 AD; the Mass of the Vigil of the Assumption begins with the decorative S just under the middle of the page. The prayers given here are different from those of the Gregorian Sacramentary which are described below. Above it is the Mass of St Eusebius, which is still kept as a commemoration on the vigil to this day in the Extraordinary Form. (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Latin 12048)

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The Vigil of the Assumption is not attested in the most ancient liturgical books of the Roman Rite, most notably, the oldest form of the Gelasian Sacramentary, ca. 750 AD. It is found in the Gellone Sacramentary only 30 years later, and in all copies of the Gregorian Sacramentary. In the Roman Missal, the Gregorian chant parts are all taken from other Masses of the Virgin Mary. The Introit *Vultum tuum* is also sung on the Annunciation and at the Votive Mass of the Virgin in Christmastide, which indicates that the salvation of the human person in both body and soul, which God begins to effect in the Incarnation, and which He manifests to the world with His birth, is first perfected when His Mother is assumed into heaven body and soul.

The Epistle is taken from the twenty-fourth chapter of Sirach, in which Wisdom, understood in medieval tradition as a figure of the Virgin Mary, “praises her own self, and is honored in God, ... and among the blessed is blessed, etc.” The verses selected for the vigil are 23-31, the first of which may have been chosen in reference to the tradition that after the Assumption, flowers grew out of the stone floor of the tomb in which the Apostles had laid Her body to rest. “As the vine I have brought forth a pleasant odor: and my flowers are the fruit of honor and riches.” And likewise, the last verse, “They that explain me shall have life everlasting”, points to the Virgin as the first-fruits of mankind’s eternal redemption in Her Son.

The feast of the Assumption was adopted into the Roman Rite from the Byzantine towards the end of the 7th century, under Pope St Sergius I (687-701), who was of Syrian origins, but born and raised in Palermo, Sicily, then part of the Byzantine Empire. In the Byzantine Rite, two separate parts of St Luke’s Gospel are taken together as a single reading at the Divine Liturgy, [chapter 10, 38-42](#), in which the Lord tells Martha that her sister Mary “hath chosen the better part”, and chapter 11, 27-28, in which a woman in the crowd says to Him, “Blessed is the womb that bore thee.” In the Wurzburg lectionary, the oldest of the Roman Rite, which is roughly contemporary with Pope Sergius, these readings are both given for the “birth (into heaven) of St Mary”, but as two separate entries; it may be that they were nevertheless read together as in the Greek tradition. However, the Roman Rite makes almost no use of these kinds of composite readings, and in the second oldest lectionary, that of Murbach, from roughly a century later, the second part has disappeared. Its association with the Assumption was then preserved by assigning it to the vigil.

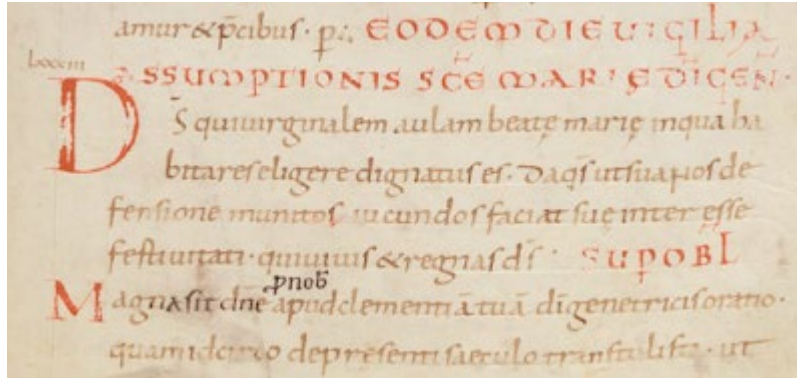
The most interesting aspect of the Mass is the evolution of its prayers. The collect appears in the Gregorian Sacramentary (ca. 800 AD) in the same form it has in the Missal of St Pius V.

“Deus, qui virginálem aulam beátae Maríae, in qua habitáres, elígere dignátus es: da, quaesumus; ut, sua nos defénsione munitos, jucundos facias suae interesse festivitáti. – O God, Who deigned to choose for Thy dwelling the virginal womb (lit. ‘court’) of the blessed Mary, grant, we beseech Thee, that, protected by Her defense, we may with joy take part in her festival.”

In its original form, the Secret is very unusual in that it contains no petition.

“Magna est, Dómine, apud clementiam tuam Dei Genetrícis oratio: quam idcirco de praesenti saeculo transtulisti; ut pro peccátis nostris apud te fiduciáliter intercédát. – Great before Thy clemency, o Lord, is the prayer of the Mother of God, whom Thou didst transport from this present age for this reason, that She might confidently intercede with Thee for our sins.”

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The first part of Mass of the Vigil of the Assumption in the Echternach Sacramentary, 895 AD, with the alteration of the verb “est” to “sit”, as noted below. Note that another scribe, still perhaps worried that the prayer was still not sufficiently petitionary, added the words “pro nobis – for us.” (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Latin 9433)

Already by the end of the ninth century, this prayer appears in the Echternach Sacramentary with a very slight emendation; the first verb is changed to the subjunctive, which makes it a petition: “Magna **sit**... – **May** the prayer of the Mother of God be great...” This was evidently still deemed too unlike a typical Secret, and was later emended again to the more conventional form it has in the Tridentine Missal, “Munera nostra ... commendet oratio - May the prayer of the Mother of God commend our offerings...”

It is a well-known fact that although the Church has officially defined the fact of the Virgin Mary’s bodily Assumption, it has never formally pronounced on the question of whether She died first or not. However, the weight of tradition, going back to the very earliest Eastern sources, is very much of the opinion that She did die first. This is explicitly stated in many prayers used on the feast of the Assumption in the West, including the Post-Communion of the vigil in its original form.

“Concéde, miséricors Deus, fragilitáti nostrae praesidium: ut, qui sanctae Dei Genetrícis **requiem celebrámus**; intercessiónis ejus auxilio, a nostris iniquitátibus resurgámus. – Grant, o merciful God, Thy protection for our frailty, that **we who celebrate the repose** of the holy Mother of God, may rise again from our iniquities with the help of Her intercession.”

In the context of the Roman Rite, in which the liturgy for the dead repeatedly uses the words “Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine”, this should certainly be read as an allusion to the belief that the Virgin Mary did in fact die before the Assumption. It also looks forward to the traditional Epistle of the feast itself, Sirach 24, 11-20 (minus verse 14), which begins with the words “In all things I sought rest (requiem), and I shall abide in the inheritance of the Lord.” The editors of the Tridentine Missal, however, decided to take a more neutral stance on a point thitherto undefined, and therefore changed “requiem celebrámus” to “festiuitátem praeuenímus – look forward to Her festivity.”

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The Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1665, by Juan Martín Cabezalero (1633-73).