

**August 15, 2008 – Feast of the Assumption**  
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Revelation 11:19, 12:1-6, 10	A pregnant woman, appears in the sky, clothed in the sun, like a heavenly queen she averts danger and gives birth in safely
Psalm 45:10, 11, 12, 16	Descriptions of the bride who becomes a queen.
First Corinthians 15:20-26	The resurrection of the dead came through a human being; in Christ shall all be brought to life.
Luke 1:39-56	Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth; both women are pregnant. Mary proclaims the wonders of how God seems to turn the world upside down.

For centuries among Christians there was a conviction that Mary's body was holy and that at her death she was taken bodily into heaven. Today's Feast of the Assumption recalls and celebrates this belief. One wonders about the sentiments and thinking behind the ancient devotion and what the images in today's readings mean for our world.

I lived in Tanzania for more than 30 years, most recently working with women's groups. Now, while serving in the United States, I am a board member of the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN), based in Washington, D.C. The mission of AFJN, in collaboration with like-minded groups, is to influence U.S. policies to ensure a more just and equitable future for Africa. It is with this background that I reflect on today's readings and find meaning in today's feast.

There appears in the sky a pregnant woman. She is standing on the moon. A heavenly queen, clothed with the sun, she is about to give birth. A flaming dragon is waiting for the new born, to destroy it. But catastrophe is avoided; the child is saved from the dragon and the woman lead to safety.

In contrast to Revelation's cosmic drama in the sky, Luke's gospel brings us down to earth with the story of a village girl setting off into the hill country to visit an elderly relative, who like herself, is miraculously pregnant. When the two women meet Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and Mary proclaims the wonders of how God seems to turn the world upside down. This young woman knows that God confuses the proud, deposes the mighty from their thrones, and raises the lowly to high places. The hungry are given good things, while the rich are sent away empty.

While I can be skeptical about such reversals I also have experiences that verify the possibilities. In Tanzania women would sit together and talk about life's challenges and blessings. We read the Scriptures and reflected on their meanings. The stories often turned my assumptions upside down.

**Imagine this:** A woman who lost her corn crop because of bad weather reflects, "I still have my hoe and my health, so next year might be better."

**Picture this:** A woman lifts a neighbor, an adult suffering with AIDS, onto her back. Slowly, with the weight she bears, she picks her way down a steep rocky hillside path to the main road. She hopes a bus will pass so her neighbor can get to the hospital.

**Listen to this:** A woman sits on a straw mat with a friend who has AIDS. She rubs her friend's aching legs and they tell one another about traditional medicines that really work to soothe sore limbs.

**And this:** A widow who lost her husband to AIDS, advises other women about how having prepared a will with her husband before his death protected her and her children from exploitation.

Stories like these, of hope, courage, generosity, and wisdom touched my heart and challenged the smug way I view the world. Africa does not need pity.

An estimated 33 million people still live with HIV/AIDS; more than 15 million children worldwide have been orphaned. Thirty three million! Can we imagine all those people?! Each one is an individual, someone's mother, father, and someone's child.

Kind women, poor women, pregnant women, mothers, like Mary's, each one's body is precious. Each one's child is precious. Each one has a right to food, shelter, and health care. How are vulnerable mothers and children protected from today's "dragons"? Women around the world have stories to tell. Do we have hearts big enough to listen to their songs of praise, their concerns, so that we might learn from them, so that our assumptions are turned upside down? Is my life style built on their backs, their labor, their country's resources like oil, diamonds, coltan? Why should we care! We've got enough problems of our own!

Our world is shrinking. U.S. government policies affect in very direct ways the lives of ordinary women, men and children in Tanzania. We might ask, "Should the United States require that funds designated to purchase HIV/AIDS medicines for people in other countries be limited to medicines produced by U.S. pharmaceuticals?" ("Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world," MOGC's 2008 U.S. elections booklet)

Who are our neighbors? We are related to one another, whether we face it or turn our backs. Is it possible that the death of a child in Africa is as tragic and worthy of attention as the death of a child in the U.S.? We all inhabit the same planet and we are all mortal.

Do we allow our hearts to travel across the hills to neighbors around the world, or do we close our hearts, keep them safe, at home. Can we really believe that security can be achieved, not by means of weapons and threats, but through compassion, care, and just relationships? Can God's ways turn things upside down, really?! Who will keep the child safe, and protect the mother, if not we?! Is that not our task as followers of Jesus?

### **For more information:**

Our Catholic social tradition holds as sacred the right to life and the dignity of every person, especially the most vulnerable. A new president and congress can ensure that the U.S. shows leadership in the fight against AIDS by providing a robust, comprehensive response to help poor countries. Read more in "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world," a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the source of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:  
[www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm](http://www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm)

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