

500 Years Ago, This is What Europeans Were Doing on August 15

The answer: celebrating the feast of Mary's Assumption.

From early centuries, Christians believed that Jesus Christ's mother, Mary, was taken up ("assumed") body and soul into heaven upon her death. They celebrated this event annually with a feast day since at least the 6th century. And in Europe of 1515, when the overwhelming majority of people were practicing Christians, the celebration of this feast would have been visible and widespread.

According to Francis Weiser in his [*Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*](#) (published in 1952), here is what would have been taking place all over Europe to commemorate the feast:

- **Processions:** "In many places of central Europe, also in Spain, France, Italy, and South America, such processions are held. In Austria the faithful, led by the priest, walk through the fields and meadows imploring God's blessing upon the harvest with prayer and hymns. In France... her statue is carried in solemn procession through the cities and town on August 15 with great splendor and pageantry, while church bells peal and the faithful sing hymns in Mary's honor."
- **Blessing of Herbs and Fruits:** "The fact that herbs picked in August were considered of great power in healing occasioned the medieval practice of the 'Blessing of Herbs' on Assumption Day. The Church thus elevated a popular belief of pre-Christian times into an observance of religious import... The city of Würzburg in

Bavaria used to be a favored center of these blessings, and from this fact it seems to have received its very name in the twelfth century (*Würz*: spice herb)... In Sicily people keep a partial or total abstinence from fruit during the first two weeks of August in honor of the Blessed Virgin. On the feast day itself they have all kinds of fruit blessed in church and serve them at dinner. They also present each other with baskets of fruit on Assumption Day.

- **Blessing of Nature:** “Finally, there is the old and inspiring custom on August 15 of blessing the elements of nature which are the scene of man’s labors and the source of human food. In all Christian countries before the Reformation the clergy used to bless the countryside, its farms, orchards, fields, and gardens. In the western sections of Austria the priests still perform the ‘Blessing of the Alps,’ including not only the mounts and meadows but also the farms...

In the Alpine sections of France the parish priests ride from pasture to pasture on Assumption Day or during the octave. Behind the priest on the horse sits an acolyte holding the holy-water vessel. At every meadow the blessing is given to the animals, which are gathered around a large cross decorated with branches and flowers.”

Since then, in the aftermath of the Reformation, Christians have become increasingly divided, and the Protestant churches no longer recognize Marian feasts. Furthermore, today many now refer to Europe and America as a “post-Christian” society in which the number of professed Christians who celebrate communal feasts in a visible way has dramatically declined. (As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “The trick is not to arrange a festival but to find people who can enjoy it.”) As a result, many of the customs described above have fallen by the wayside.

But they sounded beautiful.