

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
 VIGIL OF THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
 NATIONAL SHRINE OF ST. JOHN PAUL II
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

On this Third Sunday of Advent, the liturgy invites us to the joy of the spirit with the famous antiphon, which comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians: "*Gaudete in Domino*", "Rejoice in the Lord always... the Lord is at hand". The first Reading of Mass is also an invitation to joy. Zephaniah, writing at the end of the seventh century B.C., spoke to the people of Jerusalem with these words: "*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem...! The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory.*"

God Himself rejoices too, as the prophet says: "*The Lord... will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love... as on a day of festival*" (Zep 3: 17-18). This promise was fully brought about in the mystery of Christmas, which is just two weeks away. The joy that the liturgy reawakens is not reserved for us alone: it is a prophetic proclamation destined for all humanity and for the poorest of the poor.

Sometimes the Church is seen as perceived as institutional, cold, and stern. Pope Francis remarked that there are some Christians who celebrate Lent without Easter. How is it possible that we fail to rejoice in the Lord's closeness to us and fail to show forth that joy that comes from knowing the Lord.

Do we want to show forth a face that is always bitter, sad, or complaining, or could we show forth a joyful, maternal tender face? The Church shows a maternal face and gazes upon a maternal face. While the Church shows forth a maternal face to evangelize – to make known the radiant face of Jesus, who reveals the Father of Mercy – on occasion, God chooses to reveal His Son through his Mother.

Reversing the question, we could ask: "What face is revealed to us?" Tonight, on the Vigil of the Virgin of Guadalupe, I want to reflect with you upon the image of Mary that is the most powerful example of an inculturated faith and that is integral to the New Evangelization in the Americas, having led to the conversion of an entire continent, nearly five hundred years ago.

Today Pope Francis is calling us to be missionary disciples; therefore, we should consider his words in the Aparecida document:

Mary is the great missionary, the continuer of her Son's mission, who forms missionaries. As she gave birth to the Savior of the world, she brought the Gospel to our Americas. In the Guadalupe event, together with the humble Juan Diego, she presided over Pentecost, which opened us to the gifts of the Spirit. Since then, countless communities have found in her the closest inspiration for learning how to be disciples and missionaries of Jesus. We joyfully note that she has become part of the journey of each of our peoples, deeply entering into the fabric of their history and taking on the noblest and most significant features of the people in them (V CONFERENCIA GENERAL DEL EPISCOPADO LATINOAMERICANO Y DEL CARIBE, *DOCUMENTO CONCLUSIVO*, CELAM, APARECIDA 2007, n. 269).

The appearance of the Virgin at Tepeyac was and is an “event” that opened new horizons for the people of the Americas. Mary did not appear there in the same way as she did in the depictions of early Christianity or as she did in Europe. Just as she went forth to meet her kinswoman Elizabeth at the Visitation, so too she went to bring joy to the peoples of the Americas. She appeared with a mixed face, at the place of encounter between Spanish and indigenous cultures. The image, rich in symbolism, contains a “code” for revealing profound truths.

The light, and this evening we appreciate the power and brilliance of light, surrounding her reminds us of the “woman clothed with the sun.” Many including the Aztecs worshipped the sun as a god. In the light radiating from Mary, we glimpse an indication to the people the divinity of the child in her womb. She stands with the “moon under her feet.” The clouds surrounding her indicated to the indigenous people the supernatural revelation taking place. The presence of the angel shows her royal dignity. For the Meso-American peoples, only kings, queens, and dignitaries would be carried on the shoulders of others. She is an Empress whose Son brings harmony to the cosmos.

Her blue-green turquoise mantle was to the native people the color of the gods or royalty, but the Virgin did not appear to them as any of their gods. This was something new. The color of her mantle symbolized, for the indigenous, the force of life and fruitfulness. The stars on her mantle, like the clouds, show that she comes from heaven, but the pattern of the stars is that of the Winter Solstice on December 12, 1531, after which the days become lighter.

Her salmon-colored dress symbolizes the dawn of the new era and a foreshadowing of the martyrdom that would come to the peoples during times of persecution. It contains nine types of flowers in gold, representing the different tribes from Atzlan that made up Tenochtitlan, the seat of the Aztec Empire. Her centrally-located necklace indicates the centrality of Christ, the Redeemer, with the Spanish cross united with the four-petaled flower.

The dark violet cincture, located above her waist, indicates pregnancy; the four-petaled flower – the *nahui ollin* – the flower of the sun, is a symbol of plenitude or fullness, of fruitfulness and new life, and appears over her womb. The band itself, tied in a knot, means that she is pregnant. Mary is both Virgin and Mother.

The Virgin’s folded hands show her to be a woman of prayer and piety. Her right hand is delicate and lighter, and her left hand is fuller and darker, signifying the unity between Spanish and Indian culture. Her left knee also appears bent, possibly indicating that she was dancing and clapping to the rhythm of the maracas, which is how the Aztecs often prayed.

The Virgin’s face is lowered, gazing at everyone with tenderness and compassion. She looks slightly to one side, as natives did not directly at anyone as a sign of reverence. Her downcast eyes demonstrate her humility. Her facial features are neither Spanish nor Aztec but *mestizo*, a blend of races and the birth of a new people. Up to this point, people of mixed race were despised by both the Spaniards and indigenous peoples. Now, the Virgin appears as one of them to indicate her closeness (and the closeness of God) to the least members of society. She welcomes all as her children. Her eyes, upon close examination, contain human forms, including the image of Juan Diego and the bishop to whom he brought the tilma. She gazes tenderly upon humanity.

More could be said about this remarkable image. The point I want to make is that the God revealed Himself through Mary in a particular culture, making use of the symbols of that culture, in order to bring a message of life to the people, to give birth to a new people, and to help that people be a people.

In concluding the Synod of Bishops for the Americas on the Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe in 1997, Pope John Paul II said:

“The Mother of Christ appeared to a humble man, a Native American named Juan Diego. She chose him as the representative of all her beloved sons and daughters of those lands, in order to proclaim that divine Providence calls for the salvation of people of all races and cultures; the indigenous peoples, who lived there centuries ago, as well as people who came from Europe, in order to bring, despite their limitations and faults, the immense gift of the Good News.” (JOHN PAUL II, HOMILY TO CONCLUDE THE SYNOD FOR AMERICA, 12 DECEMBER 1997)

This call of Divine Providence remains. The image is important for the new evangelization because it also calls us to build a culture of encounter. In the Guadalupe event, we experience the encounter between God and man; the encounter between Spanish and indigenous culture; and the encounter between faith and culture. Importantly, the encounter helps overcome conflict and gives rise to a new synthesis of faith and a people, with their piety and devotion, which they are now bringing to the United States, and this brings joy to our hearts.

Indeed, the image of the Guadalupe has much to say to the peoples of the Americas. Her embrace is for all the peoples of this continent. She gazes upon them with tenderness and hears the cries, offering them the gift of her Son, who is the life and light of the world. She continues to teach us of the need to bear this light and life to others – to go forth in a new Visitation for a New Evangelization.

Rightly then is the Virgin of Guadalupe named the Star of the New Evangelization. In the ten years following her appearance at Tepeyac, nine million people accepted Jesus Christ. Through her God visited the people of the Americas. Together, we are the heirs to the fruit of her visit. It is now your turn to be bearers of the light. How can the image of Guadalupe help our Church be the Church that Christ wants and our people need? The task seems daunting, but the Holy Virgin of Guadalupe tells us (as did John Paul II) – Do not be afraid:

Listen and let it penetrate your heart ... do not be troubled or weighed down with grief. Do not fear any illness or vexation, anxiety or pain. Am I not here who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not your fountain of life? Are you not in the folds of my mantle? In the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else you need?