

"The Miracle of Guadalupe: Our Lady as Icon of God's Covenantal Love"

*Talk given at the 10th Annual Conference of the Queen of the Americas Guild
August 1, 2015, National Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe*

The organizers of this tenth annual conference have invited us to reflect on what Our Lady of Guadalupe can teach us about remaining in the truth of Christ, and specifically the truth that "What God has joined together, no human being must separate." We gather at a historic moment. In just over a month, we will have the joy of welcoming our Holy Father to the United States. That he is the first Successor of Saint Peter to hail from America, and is a man of deep devotion to the Blessed Mother, must bring joy to the heart of "the Empress of the Americas" and the first Evangelizer of the New World. Our joy is tempered, however, by the ongoing erosion of the fundamental meaning of marriage in our society and the profoundly negative impact this erosion has on family life. There is also growing hostility to religion in the air, threatening the constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of religion. And, looking beyond our shores, the upcoming Synod on the Family will be a critical moment for how we deal with these issues both within the Church herself and in terms of the Church's role of proclaiming the Gospel to the world in which we now live.

In so many ways we are aware of conflict, polarization, and divisions. Our Lord stated the matter very directly: "Whoever does not gather with me, scatters" (Mt 12:30). The truth of his words can be validated simply by looking at the world around us. To counterbalance this aspect of life, I would like to reflect with you today not about how human beings divide, but how God joins together. Through the sending of his Son and the Holy Spirit, the Father has revealed that God's very being is relational: to affirm that "God is love" is not to mouth a feel-good slogan, it is to utter in a deceptively simple phrase the fundamental reality of everything: the one God Who is a communion of Persons. Whatever God joins together in creation mirrors that fundamental mystery of our faith, the Most Holy Trinity. When we see how God "joins together" we will be in a better position to deal with how human beings separate.

There are, of course, laudable human efforts to overcome divisions, and they are deserving of our support. But we gather as people of faith, and as such we know that peace-keeping forces, treaties, and alliances for the common good can only take us so far. These efforts seek to unite from without; it is God's grace that joins together from within.

What God has joined: the Miracle of Tepeyac

Let us begin our reflection with the remarkable events that took place at the Hill of Tepeyac in the year 1531. Spanish explorers had reached Mexico ten years earlier, and their arrival precipitated a clash between two powerful, ancient, and highly-developed cultures. Such encounters are pivotal moments in human history, and the results are usually conquest by the more dominant force, and efforts by the subjugated people to maintain their customs and culture in hidden ways. This is a common pattern

throughout history, and held true for the colonial enterprises carried out by Europeans in the new world.

But something else also happened in Mexico, something remarkable indeed. Understandably, in the face of the violent collision between two cultures, the missionaries who came to Mexico initially made relatively few converts. And yet, in the ten years following the appearance of Our Lady at Tepeyac, eight million native people embraced the faith. Why? What did the Aztec people see when they looked at the image on Juan Diego's tilma?

The woman who appeared to Juan Diego was no Spanish *conquistadora*. She was one of their own, *la Morenita* ("the little dark one") who spoke their native tongue. The Aztecs did not have an alphabet. They used pictographs, and they read the image on the tilma like a book. The beautiful woman was of royal lineage: she wore the cloak of turquoise reserved to gods and the Aztec royal family, and she was being carried, another sign of honor accorded to the ruling family of the Aztec empire.

But this woman was more than a princess. Aztec religion centered on nature, and the elements of nature – above all the sun, moon and stars – were considered divine. Yet the stars decorate this woman's mantle, she is more prominent than the sun, and she stands on the crescent moon. Her head is bowed and her hands are folded in humble supplication – exalted though she is beyond all others, she worships one more powerful than herself. Who could this be? The observant Aztecs noticed the dark band of maternity worn by Aztec women carrying a child. Her brooch is a cross. This illustrious yet humble woman is the mother of Christ, and she is "the handmaid of the Lord" whose whole being proclaims the greatness of the one true God.

We do not know how much the Spaniards understood the significance held by this image in the Aztec cosmology; we do know what the picture meant to them: it portrayed Mary as the Immaculate Conception. The image on Juan Diego's tilma appeared in the new world at the very time when the iconography of the Immaculate Conception was being determined in Europe. As you may know, this doctrine was the subject of much theological debate. It also represented a challenge to artists: how to portray the inner spiritual condition of the woman chosen to give birth to the Savior? From the first book of the Bible came the image of the woman crushing the serpent; from the last book, the crescent moon, the crown of stars and raiment shining like the sun. The lush imagery of the Song of Songs was applied to Mary, who was seen to embody especially the verse, "*Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te*" ("You are all-beautiful, my beloved, and there is no blemish in you" [Song of Songs 4:7]).

The images of Mary as a young girl, surrounded with these symbols from Scripture, reached their zenith in the seventeenth-century masterpieces of Zurbarán, Ribera and Murillo. Here is how one art historian described these portrayals:

They evoke the Immaculate Virgin as the realization of the plan of her sublime predestination, before all creation – spiritual or physical: *Ab æterno ordinata sum* ["I was

appointed from eternity" (Proverbs 8:23)], she declares in her liturgical office. Mankind is about to receive her, but she has not fully departed from heaven. She seems to pause in her descent towards the earth upon waves of light and golden clouds: with her large eyes towards her invisible Creator, her hands joined or her arms outstretched, her feet resting on the crescent of the night, she remains for a moment motionless in this limpid and mysterious expanse. She lingers there as if in her natural element, and as if she were to know soon enough this world of darkness and misery in which all that tarnishes and soils will be powerless over her.^[1]

This poetic description applies as aptly to the image on the tilma of Juan Diego as it does to a canvas by Murillo. She who appeared to the Aztecs as one of their own race, *la Morenita*, was also venerated by the Spanish as the *Inmaculada*, whose honor Spain had championed in theological debate and whose beauty her greatest artists had celebrated.

Through the appearance and image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, God joined together two races. This joining together came, not by conquest or by a syncretistic blending of different cultures, but by the power of Christ and his Gospel. Such a joining together had been one of the first fruits of the preaching of the Gospel in the early Church. Writing to the Gentile Ephesians, the Jew Paul says:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end [Eph 2:13-16].

The covenantal love between God and Israel was expanded to embrace the Gentiles; the covenant with God also forged a covenant between races.

As she did fifteen centuries earlier in the Visitation, Mary came to Mexico carrying her unborn Child. She showed that he was the Savior of both Spaniards and Aztecs, and that he was God's answer to the deepest longings of the human heart of both peoples. In doing so, Mary gave birth to a new people, whose roots were deeply planted in very different cultures, united now, not in the blood of human sacrifices offered on the Aztec pyramids, nor in the blood shed by the conquistadors, but in the blood of Christ. What God has joined together, no human being can separate.

What God has joined: the Miracle of the Incarnation

Our Lady of Guadalupe directs our attention to a far more profound mystery than her appearance to Juan Diego and the miraculous image on his tilma. Mary described herself to him as "the Mother of the true God". *La Morenita* was more powerful than the deities worshipped by the Aztecs, for the sun, the moon, and stars were but decorations for her. But she humbly bowed her head and folded her hands in prayer, worshipping the Child within her womb, who is the Son of God.

The Incarnation of God the Son is at the heart of our faith, but it took many centuries for the Church to articulate language that would safeguard the truth that in Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God took on our human nature. Again, we see God “joining together”: in this case, joining the divine and human natures in the Person of the Son of God. Christ was neither a semi-divine being nor a creature who received divine honors after his death. Both of these ideas were current in the ancient world, so, in order to avoid any misunderstandings, the Church had to be very attentive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in expressing her faith. And Mary became a pivotal figure in that expression of faith.

The dogma that Mary is the Mother of God was solemnly defined at the Council of Ephesus in the year 431. The issue at that Council was not Mary, but Jesus – specifically, what it means to profess that he is both God and man. The conflict began with a sermon. Sometime around the year 428, a priest named Proclus preached a sermon in the cathedral of Constantinople in the presence of the patriarch, Nestorius. Several times Proclus referred to Mary as *Theotokos*, a title that had been used of her for at least a century. The Greek word is usually rendered as “Mother of God” in English, but it is a rather elusive term: literally it means “she who gave birth to the one who is God”. After the sermon, Nestorius angrily criticized the title for several reasons: it seemed to equate Mary with the goddesses of pagan religion; it implied that the eternal Son of God was a creature; it suggested that Jesus was not truly man. Proclus appealed to the Patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril, who denounced Nestorius to Pope Celestine. The Pope summoned a synod in Rome that examined the issue and condemned the position of Nestorius. Meanwhile, the emperors called for an Ecumenical Council to meet on Pentecost, 431, at Ephesus to decide the matter. At that gathering, Cyril’s position was judged to be correct: since Christ possessed both a divine nature and human nature but was one Person, the Son of God, it was proper to call Mary *Theotokos*. The title “Mother of God” was a paradox, but also orthodox: paradox, because Mary as a creature could not be the Mother of God *as God*; orthodox, because to assert that Jesus was truly born of Mary *and* was the eternal Son of God effectively proclaimed that he was fully human and fully divine.

Twenty years after the Council of Ephesus, we hear again from both a Pope and an Ecumenical Council concerning the identity of Jesus Christ. The eternal Son of God took on a human nature in the mystery of the Incarnation, but in such a way that each nature maintains its integrity. In the beautiful words of Pope Saint Leo the Great:

Lowliness was taken up by majesty, weakness by strength, mortality by eternity. ... Thus was true God born in the undiminished and perfect nature of a true man, complete in what is his and complete in what is ours. ... He took on the form of a servant without the defilement of sin, thereby enhancing the human and not diminishing the divine. For that self-emptying ... spelled no failure of power: it was an act of merciful favor.^[2]

The two natures remain distinct, but they are inseparable because the Person of the Son possesses both of them. The Council of Chalcedon formulated the dogma in this way:

We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person.[\[3\]](#)

This sounds very abstract, but the language was intended to express a core affirmation of our faith: the Son of God himself was born, died and rose from the dead to save us. Because Christ is truly God, he can perform miracles and free us from sin and death; because he is truly man, he can give us an example of courage, patience and humility.

I share this doctrinal history with you because I believe much of the confusion we face today stems from the fact that people are not grounded in the fundamental beliefs of the Church. For many people Jesus Christ is simply “a very good man”, a moral teacher. If that is all he is, then we can accept or reject his teachings (for example on the indissolubility of marriage) as one option among many. But if he is, as Catholic faith professes, the Son of God incarnate, then his teaching enjoys a unique, divine authority.

In the miracle of the Incarnation God has joined together the divine nature of the Son and the human nature of Jesus, the Son of Mary. This is the marriage of God’s divinity with our humanity, and which no human being must divide. Just as in marriage the man and woman are two who become one flesh – truly becoming one while each retains their own unique individual identity – so in Jesus Christ the divine and the human come together as one, but without confusion or absorption of one into the other. But Christ’s human nature is something that he shares with us, and so there is, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, another joining together: we believers are members of the Mystical Body of Christ and belong to the Church, the Bride of Christ. Here again we see how God’s “joining together” does not entail a diminishment. We do not lose our individual identity by virtue of our union with Christ; on the contrary, it is through our union with Him that we realize our true identity. We must recall again that this union represents a created reflection of the mystery of the Holy Trinity: the three Persons do not lose themselves in their total gift of Self to one another, but express their identity precisely in their relationships with one another.

What God has Joined Together: the Miracle of Marital Union

The union between Christ and his Bride, the Church, is manifested in a unique way in the sacrament of matrimony, the conjugal union of man and woman. We have seen how Saint Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, spoke eloquently about the joining together of Jew and Gentile in the Church. In that same Epistle he also spoke about this “joining together”:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word ... Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife

loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church" [Eph 5:25-32].

We should recall that the author is writing to a community of Gentiles, for whom divorce was an accepted practice. In speaking of the union between husband and wife, Paul quotes the same text from Genesis that Our Lord used when condemning the practice of divorce among the Jewish people: "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). In the face of laws to the contrary, even the Law of Moses, Christ himself and the apostolic Church proclaim that marriage must be understood as God intends it: a lifelong, faithful union between one man and one woman. That is the truth of Christ, and we must profess this truth even in the face of opposition and vituperation.

Our Lord makes it clear that indissolubility is an essential attribute of any marriage. Saint Paul emphasizes that this element has a particular importance in Christian marriage, because it is a sacrament, a visible manifestation of Christ's love for the Church. This love creates an unbreakable bond; Christian marriage is a sacrament of God's covenantal love, which is unending. As Paul told the Corinthians, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you ... was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor 1:19-20).

Fidelity to the truth of Christ brings us into conflict with a society that is attempting to "re-define" marriage, and, actually, has been for a very long time now. We also see continuing and increasing tension surrounding marriage within the Church herself. There are some who claim that "we can change the discipline but not the doctrine." I have to say that such a statement strikes me as rather superficial, in that it makes an artificially strict separation between discipline and doctrine. While they are distinct, discipline exists to reinforce our understanding of the truth of Christ; some disciplines that are more distant from the doctrine they reinforce can be modified without implying a change in doctrine at all, such as laws regarding fast and abstinence. Other disciplines are more deeply intertwined with the doctrines they uphold, and some – such as those having to do with the worthy reception of Holy Communion – cannot be changed without necessitating a change in the doctrine.

With regard to the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage, this truth was taught by Christ himself. Indeed, nowhere else in the Gospels does Our Lord teach so specifically and directly on a topic. Usually his moral teachings are of a more general nature, which the believer must then discern how to apply in a concrete situation, such as turning the other cheek and going the extra mile. But with marriage Our Lord teaches very unambiguously on a specific situation, and his Bride, the Church, has faithfully handed down this teaching for two thousand years. If we are to remain in the truth of Christ, we need to profess that what God has joined together, no human being must separate.

That being said, there is another truth of Christ as well: he welcomed sinners and ate with them. This was a source of scandal to many devout people in his day. Those who call for the Church to be more welcoming and inclusive appeal to the truth that Christ reached out to the alienated and marginalized; this, too, is a truth in which we must remain. How can we proclaim both the truth of the indissolubility of marriage and the truth that Christ is the Savior of all, and is the great sign of God's unconditional love for us? Or to put it another way, "How can we join together the truth about marriage and truth about Christ's universal salvific work?"

I suggest that we begin by looking to the focus of our conference: what *God* joins together. As we have seen, God joins together realities that, humanly speaking, defy union. Through the mediation of Our Lady of Guadalupe He joined together the Spanish and Aztec peoples. Far more wondrously, in the Incarnation He joined together the infinite, eternal, omnipotent divine nature of the Son of God with the limited, created, human nature of Jesus of Nazareth. He joins together a man and woman in marriage so that the two become one flesh. If we are to find how to join together the truth about marriage and the truth about God's limitless mercy, we must follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, I suggest that the most important thing we can all do at this delicate moment in the life of the Church is pray to the Holy Spirit and to carry out acts of penance, imploring the Spirit's guidance upon the Church.

I think we also have to reframe our approach to these challenging issues. There is much talk about "culture wars", and certainly believers have both the right and the obligation to make our voices heard in the conversations taking place in the wider society. We Catholics are not cut off from the world around us; consciously or not, we are influenced by the culture in which we live; it is like the very air that we breathe. Can anyone doubt that divorce and remarriage have become critical issues for us Catholics in part because they have become so widely accepted in our culture? So yes, we must speak out, and accept the attacks our beliefs provoke as the price of our fidelity to the truth.

But at the same time, we need to root out (to the best of our ability) the corrosive influence of the "culture wars" *within* the Church. For us as believers, it is ultimately not a matter of laws, terms, and policies – it is a question of ongoing conversion and of *discipleship*. I recently came across an interesting conference on the subject of marriage and divorce given by Ronald Knox to Catholic students at Oxford in the 1950s. He devoted almost the entire conference to a careful examination of the occasions when Jesus forbade divorce, and exactly what language he used. Knox reviewed the various interpretations offered by scholars and then, in the final paragraph, he stepped back from this microscopic analysis of a few verses, and challenged his listeners to look at Christ's teaching in a broader context:

Meanwhile, what was our Lord's teaching about marriage? This. 'I tell you that he who casts his eyes on a woman so as to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' That is, the dangerous moment in a dangerous intimacy is not the one we think; it is several moments earlier. 'It is not what goes into his mouth that makes a

man unclean; what makes a man unclean is what comes out of his mouth' That is, it is we who shape our destinies, not they us. 'If I have washed your feet, I who am the Master and the Lord, you in your turn ought to wash one another's feet.' That is, you cannot stop giving, and continue to possess. If people would live by *that* part of our Lord's teaching, there would be no divorces, and no need for them.[\[4\]](#)

Monsignor Knox reminds us that Our Lord's love is unconditional, but so are his demands – because love does make demands. We have to recognize what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the cost of discipleship”. Christ told the woman caught in adultery: “Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you.” But he also told her: “Go, and do not sin again” (Jn 8:10, 11). Discipleship requires sacrifice, because it is a conscious imitation of Jesus Christ, who showed his love for us by laying down his life.

As Catholics, we must not only safeguard the institution of matrimony as God intended it, we must also help our own people see their marriage as a vocation, an expression of their following of Christ and their path to holiness in him. What this means is captured eloquently in the Exhortation that used to be given at a Catholic wedding:

Henceforth you will belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, and one in affections. And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this mutual life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy, and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete.[\[5\]](#)

The sacrificial love of discipleship brings us back to Our Lady, the disciple *par excellence*. She who at Tepeyac identified herself as “the Mother of the true God” also asked Juan Diego, “Am I not here, I, who am your Mother?” When did the Mother of Jesus become our Mother? When she united herself to her Son's sacrifice on the Cross. Speaking of Mary's discipleship, the Second Vatican Council teaches:

After this manner the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth. Finally, she was given by the same Christ Jesus dying on the cross as a mother to His disciple with these words: ‘Woman, behold thy son’.[\[6\]](#)

Those words of Our Lord have been interpreted as a final act of filial piety: Jesus arranged that his Mother would not be bereft after his departure. But there is a deeper significance to what Saint John relates. Immediately after uttering these words, the Evangelist says that Jesus knew that all was now finished – finished, not simply because he was dying, but finished because he had completed his work. By his obedience unto death, Christ brought about a new creation: Mary and the beloved disciple were the nucleus of a new family, bound together, not by ties of blood, but by

faith. Christ is the New Adam, transforming the tree of death into the tree of life; the Church is the New Eve, born from his pierced side; and Mary is the image and embodiment of that New Eve, “the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20).

This is the Mother who carried Christ to the new world: the woman of faith, who invited Spaniards and Aztecs alike to believe in her Son and imitate his sacrificial love unto death. She invites us to do the same today, to stand with her at the foot of the Cross. And, in the face of the tensions, the confusion, the polarization that afflict our world, she says to us what she once said to Juan Diego: “Am I not here, I, who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything more?”

[1] Maurice Vloberg, “The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception,” in Edward O'Connor, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1958, pp. 494-495.

[2] Letter of Pope Leo to Flavian.

[3] CCC 467, citing the Council of Chalcedon (451): DS 302.

[4] Knox, “Our Lord’s Teaching on Marriage and Divorce,” *University Sermons*, pp. 295-296.

[5] “Exhortation Before Marriage,” *Rituale Romanum* (written by Msgr. Charles Ramm, Pastor of St. Mary’s Cathedral).

[6] LG, n. 58.