

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
CATHEDRAL OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI, DIOCESE OF METUCHEN
CONSECRATION OF THE DIOCESE TO JESUS THROUGH
OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2019**

My Dear Friends in Christ,

It is my great privilege as the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father, to bring you the warm greetings of Pope Francis and to assure you of his prayers as we conclude this “Year of Awakening to Faith” in the Diocese of Metuchen and consecrate this Diocese to Jesus through Our Lady of Guadalupe. I thank His Excellency Bishop James Checchio for his kind invitation to join you on this wonderful feast. Having served as nuncio in Mexico for nine years and nearly four years here in the United States, the holy Virgin of Guadalupe, the Star of the New Evangelization and Patroness of the Americas, is dear to me.

You have spent this year praying intensely, adoring Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament, begging the Lord for a renewal of faith. You have deepened your conversion to Christ through reception of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, but also by making pilgrimages, recognizing that faith is a journey and that not only God but the whole Church accompanies you along the way. You have journeyed in faith in spite of the storms that are afflicting the Church and the world, and you have sought – have earnestly desired – to seek the face of Christ.

However, if you read the popular newspapers or see how the media portrays the Church, you would not hear about a close-knit community of missionary disciples who tends to the poor, marginalized, sick and the oppressed or of a community who defends the dignity of the unborn, the disabled, the migrant, or the elderly. Often, the Church is portrayed as a bureaucracy, a cold, heartless institution. It is not right, and maybe it is not fair, but instead of lamenting how she is portrayed, we could accept a challenge – to show forth the maternal of the Church. In our daily lives and actions, do we show forth the tenderness of a mother toward her children?

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, as the Diocese is consecrated to Jesus through 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. I see this image as integral to the New Evangelization in the Americas, just as it led to the conversion of an entire continent, nearly five hundred years ago. If the Pope is now calling all of us to be missionary disciples, then consider the words he wrote 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 in the Christianity of Medieval 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, not as a European, but 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 surrounding her reminds us of the “woman clothed with the sun.” Since many people, included the Aztecs, worshipped the sun as a god, one sees the light radiating from her, indicating to the people the divinity of the child in her womb. She stands, as Revelation indicates with the “moon under her feet.” The clouds surrounding her would have indicated to the indigenous people the supernatural revelation taking place. The presence of the angel shows the woman’s 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 mantle was a blue-green turquoise, which to the native people was the color of the gods or royalty, but she 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 has been interpreted as symbolizing the dawn of the new era, but also as 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 necklace is centrally located and its shape, with its cross, indicates the centrality of Christ, the Redeemer. The Spanish cross is 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. Pope Francis, in his visit to Mexico, insisted on one thing: that he be able to spend as much time in prayer before this image of the Virgin. Some people say that Pope Francis' first miracle was to get the whole Mexican nation to be silent for thirty minutes as he prayed before this image!

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. The Virgin of Guadalupe is a reminder of what Pope Francis says, "Unity prevails over conflict" and that the "whole is superior to the parts." Jesus Himself prays, "That all may be one as You and I are one ... so that the world may believe."

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 called 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. As heirs to this great heritage of inculturated faith, we are left to ponder: how might I make known this faith in this particular culture, in this local church of Metuchen? How can the image of Guadalupe help our Church be the Church that Christ wants and our people need?

With Bishop Checchio, you are called to evangelize and re-evangelize this Diocese. I know the task seems daunting, but with God all things are possible. I conclude with the words of the Holy Virgin of Guadalupe:

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?