

THE CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA

Our Lady of Guadalupe December 12, 1977

.....¹the traditional procession that is undertaken in so many places in Latin America in honor of a Virgin who is very much our own has come to a close in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. At the dawn of civilization in our continent, Mary came to Tepeyac and became present to our Church in a very unique way. She came not as a European woman but as a native Indian of our recently discovered continent. She came as a mestizo, a new race that had arisen at that time in history. The Virgin of Tepeyac gave a unique face to the Church throughout the continent.

My dear Catholics, I am very interested in the fact that our religion should have an authentic concept (not one that is now so slandered and falsified) of this God who brought the cross of his Christ to our continent wanting to personify this redeeming faith in the blessed person of Mary with a distinct Latin American face. It seems to me that the Church arises principally with three characteristics that are most distinguishing of our appearance as a Church that redeems the Latin American continent with the power of the gospel but also with her own characteristics. They are: 1) the spirit of poverty, 2) an insertion into the history of our people, 3) the inseparable union between evangelization and human promotion. In honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe and for a better understanding of our faith, we will try to explain briefly these three characteristics that give a unique face to our Latin American Catholicism.

The spirit of poverty

In the first place, Mary and the Church in Latin America are characterized by poverty. The Second Vatican Council says that Mary stands out among the poor who await redemption from God. (a) Mary appears in the Bible as the expression of poverty, of humility and of one who needs everything from God. When she comes to America, her intimate, motherly dialogue is with an Indian, an outcast, a poor man.

Mary's dialogue in America begins with a sign of poverty, poverty that is a hunger for God, poverty that is joy of independence. Poverty is freedom. Poverty is needing others, needing brothers and sisters, supporting one another so as to help one another. This is what Mary means and what the Church means in Latin America. If at some time the Church betrayed her spirit of poverty, then she would be unfaithful to the gospel, which intends her to be distinct from the powers of the earth, not depending on the money that makes humans happy, but depending on the power of Christ, on God's power. This is her greatness. Thus Mary teaches the Church, primarily the Church in Latin America and people who are poor and displaced and living on the margins of society --- she teaches us the necessity of this virtue in order to be saved. We do not mean that people who lack this virtue are condemned but rather we are saying that people must become poor and humble, people must experience a need for God if they want to find forgiveness and the grace of salvation. There is no other way and in Latin American the Virgin and the Church are characterized by this cry of redemption: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* (b) We give

thanks to Mary for having pointed out, from the beginning of our Christian civilization on this continent, this blessed characteristic of evangelical poverty and this evening we are invited to be blessed with the blessedness of the gospel.

The Church's insertion in the history of our people

My dear sisters and brothers, in the second place Mary is the image of a Church that does not want to experience herself as being on the margins of society, but rather wishes to be located in the midst of people's lives. Very soon after the discovery of America, Mary inserts herself into our history --- Mary lives in our history. Our people sense that Mary is part of our people's soul. All Latin American people feel this. No one has entered so deeply into our people's heart as Mary. She is the image and the likeness of a Church that wants to be present with the gospel's light in the civilizations of the world's peoples, as God wants her to be present in their social, economic, and political transformation. We cannot put aside the gospel that nourishes us and we cannot betray the Church or the God who has given us the secrets of the true paths that lead women and men to happiness.

A Church on the margins of history would not be the redeeming Church of humanity. A Church that wants to be present, like Mary, in the heart of every person and in the heart of every people is the true and authentic Church of Christ. Therefore we praise and we bless the Virgin of Guadalupe for having given us this sublime gesture that is so profoundly rooted in the hearts of our people. My dear Catholics, because you and I are the Church let us make this Church that we bear as a result of our faith --- let us make this Church the salt of the earth and the light of the world. (c) Let us see this Church as an example for our homes. Let us be the people of El Salvador who try to honor our work, a people who try to be honest, a people who try to give honor to their faith so that these words of the Second Vatican Council do not become a reality in our midst: *This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age* (d). May this faith of our Church, this faith that as a result of our baptism has become such a part of our lives --- may this faith become salt and light in the midst of the world in which we live.

The inseparable union between evangelization and human promotion

Finally, my sisters and brothers, Mary is the model of a Church that knows how to combine evangelization and human promotion. An evangelization that has no love for the human person, an evangelization that is not concerned with human development --- such an evangelization would be a false evangelization. A religion that was not *concerned about promoting our people and teaching them to read and write, a religion that was not concerned about incorporating into our civilization the many people who live on the margins of society* --- such a religion would be inauthentic and incapable of bringing about redemption. Evangelization and human promotion --- this is our great task. Mary not only believed, not only was she happy with her faith but rather at the foot of the cross, beside the Redeemer she becomes the most intimate collaborator of Christian renewal of humanity.

This is true human development and true liberation that the Church learned from Mary (e) and from other great Christians. The Church has seen the need to renew women and men because we cannot have a new continent without new women and men, without hearts renewed by Christian redemption, without hearts and souls that, like Mary, are holy because

at the foot of the cross they have learned how to share the redeeming blood of Christ in order to save the societies of our continent.

My sisters and brothers, blessed be God for the Virgin of Guadalupe is such a complete sign in our religion. Let us try to imitate the Virgin. May our presence here not simply be a presence to participate in a folkloric procession! Rather may our presence be a sign of a profound reflection that enables us to live, like her, in the midst of our society, bringing to this society the salt of our faith and promoting those profound changes that our society demands so that we might no longer live in an environment of sin but become converted and participate in true redemption.

Together with Mary, a very devoted woman, a great Christian and a great woman of Latin America, the Virgin of Guadalupe who is present in the soul of each one of us --- together with her let us offer to God the immaculate sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ who redeems our people. We believe in one God...

¹ The greeting and opening words of this homily are not recorded on the tape.

Margin References (a) LG 55: (b) Mt 5,3: (c) Mt 5,13-14: (d) GS 43: (e) M 1,3.