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# THE CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA

## **Our Lady of Guadalupe**

**12 December 1977**

... the traditional procession is just finishing in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe<sup>1</sup>. Such processions take place not just in this city, but among all the peoples of Latin America in honor of this Virgin who is very much our own. As soon as European civilization reached our continent, Mary appeared on the mountain of Tepeyac with features much like ours to make the church present among us. Her facial appearance was not that of European women nor that of the native Indian women of our recently discovered continent. Rather, she appeared as a mestizo, the new race that was arising at that moment of history. Since that time the sweet dark-skinned girl of Tepeyac has given a unique face to the church of this continent.

What most interests me, dear Catholics, is that our concept of our religion be a true one and not the falsified, maligned image that so many have now. We need a true idea of this God who brought the cross of his Christ to our continent and wanted to personify this redeeming religion in the blessed figure of Mary with a distinct Latin American face. The church that redeems the Latin American continent with the power of the Gospel has a very distinctive character. She seems to me to have three special qualities: the spirit of poverty, her insertion into the history of our peoples, and the inseparable union between evangelization and human development. 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 Latin American Catholicism.

### **The spirit of poverty**

In the first place, Mary and the church in America are characterized by poverty. Mary, says the Second Vatican Council, stands especially among the poor who await redemption from God (LG 55). Mary appears in the Bible as the expression of poverty and humility; she is the person who needs everything from God. When she comes to America, she engages in tender motherly dialogue with an Indian who is a poor man living on the margins.

That's how Mary's dialogue in America begins: with a gesture of poverty. Poverty is hunger for God. Poverty is the joy of detachment. Poverty is freedom. Poverty is needing others, needing brothers and sisters, supporting one another in mutual assistance. 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 was unfaithful to the Gospel that instructs her to be distinct from the powers of the earth. She is not to depend on the money that makes humans happy but on the power of Christ, on the power of God. This is her greatness. This is what Mary teaches the church, especially in Latin America among the poor, the barefoot, those living on the fringes of society. This is the virtue we need in order to be saved. We do not mean that people who are rich are condemned, but they do need to become poor and humble; they must experience a

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

true need for God if they want to find forgiveness and the grace of salvation. There is no other way. In Latin America the Virgin and the church proclaim this cry of redemption: «Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven» (Matt 5:3). We give thanks to Mary for having pointed out this blessed virtue of evangelical poverty at the very beginning of our Christian civilization on this continent. This evening she invites us to be blessed with the blessedness of the Gospel.

### **The church's insertion in the history of our peoples**

In the second place, dear sisters and brothers, Mary is the image of a church that does not want to feel that she is on the margins of history; rather, she wishes to be where people are fully living their lives. No sooner was America discovered than Mary inserted herself. Here is the proof: our people sense that Mary is part of their soul; in fact, all the peoples of Latin America feel this way. No one has entered more deeply into our people's hearts than Mary. She is therefore the image and the insistence of a church that wants to be present with the light of the Gospel in different civilizations and in the social, economic, and political transformations of the world. We cannot prescind from the Gospel that nourishes us; we cannot betray the church or the God who has given us the secrets of the true paths that lead people to happiness.

A church on the margins of history would not be the church that redeems human beings. The true and authentic church of Christ is the church that wants to be present, like Mary, in the heart of every person and in the heart of every people. That is why we bless Mary of Guadalupe for having left us this sublime gesture of living so deeply in the hearts of our people. Therefore, dear Catholics, since you and I are the church, let us make this church we carry by faith the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-14). In our homes let us make this church an example of fidelity to duty well accomplished. Let us be Salvadorans who try to honor our work and our integrity. Let our faith be active lest we experience what the Council denounced as the gravest sin of our time, the divorce between faith and life (GS 43). May this faith of our church which we have since our baptism become salt and light in the midst of the world in which we live.

### **The inseparable union between evangelization and human development**

Finally, sisters and brothers, Mary is the model of a church that knows how to combine evangelization and human development. Evangelization that shows no love for human beings and their development would be false, mutilated evangelization. If religion is not concerned about helping our people develop, teaching the illiterate to read, and incorporating into civilization the many who live on the margins, then it would not be the true church of redemption. Evangelization and human development—together these are our great task. So they were for Mary, who not only believed and was blessed in her faith but also stood at the foot of the cross beside the Redeemer, for she is the most faithful collaborator of the great development that comes from the Christian renewal of humanity.

This is true human development and the true liberation that the church learned from Mary (M 1,3) and from other great Christians. Human renewal is needed because there cannot be a new continent without new women and men, without hearts renewed by Christian redemption, without hearts and souls like Mary's. We need holy people who have learned at

the foot of the cross how to sprinkle Christ's redeeming blood so as to save the societies of our continent.

Blessed be God, sisters and brothers, for making the Virgin of Guadalupe such an outstanding sign of our religion. Let us try to imitate her. May our presence here be not simply part of a folkloric procession; may it also inspire sincere reflection that enables us to live as she did, inserted into society, bringing to society the salt of our faith and promoting those profound changes that our society demands so that we no longer live in an ambience of sin but are converted and participate in true redemption.

Together with Mary, the Virgin of Guadalupe, a dedicated Christian and great Latin American woman present in the soul of each one of us, let us offer to God the immaculate sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ who redeems our people.