

***Ecclesia in America* in light of Our Lady of Guadalupe,
Star of the new evangelization and Mother of the civilization
of love**

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A QUESTION OF PATHS

On December 12, 1531, the last day of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, when St. Juan Diego took a different path in order to find a priest for his dying uncle, Our Lady met him on his detour and posed these questions: “My youngest son, what is going on? Where are you going? Where are you headed?”¹

Today, during this Congress, we ask the very same questions: *What is going on? Where are we going? Where are we headed?*

¹ *Nican Mopohua*, v. 107.

Like New Spain in the early 16th century, we too face in many ways a great clash of civilizations—in our time made more troubling by the accelerating process of globalization.

From Chile to Canada, vast majorities still consider themselves Christian. And yet...the countries and cultures built upon Christian faith show great failures of charity, dignity and truth—failures inconsistent with being disciples of the God who is Love. There is simultaneously both a familiarity with Christ and an ignorance of Christ, which in many places has resulted in a mischaracterization of Christ and of the mission of the Church.

The land we are called to evangelize is in an important sense new: it is neither pre-Christian nor Christian—it is for the first time in history a land facing a horizon that is *post-Christian*.

The people who once knew Christ and followed him on both a personal and a cultural level now in too many ways fail to recognize him, either in the face of his Church or in the face of the poor.

Where are we going?

As we reflect on the situation of the Church in America, something resonates with us in Juan Diego's reply to Our Lady: "Though it grieves me, though I will cause your face and your heart anguish, I must tell you...that one of your servants...is very ill. A terrible sickness has taken hold of him; he will surely die from it soon."²

Juan Diego spoke of the plague killing his uncle. We confront another illness—one just as deadly. And like Juan Diego, it is the care for the human family which brings us here today. Her intervention can come none too soon. The wisdom of *Ecclesia in America* is apparent.

ECCLESIA IN AMERICA

Ecclesia in America is the blueprint for the new evangelization.

Speaking of "America" rather than "the Americas", the apostolic exhortation proposes a unified path for our entire

² *Nican Mopohua*, v. 111.

hemisphere—not one continent or the other, not one country or the other, but all as a unity. This is also in a sense countercultural and even radical. Despite increased globalization, no other institution lays out a single vision of the entire hemisphere to overcome the greatly-varied problems in each country.

While aware of and eager to rectify the many illnesses in America, the apostolic exhortation communicates not a political vision but an ecclesial one; not a vision of systems but a vision of humanity encountering Christ. In other words, it presents a vision of an “inculturated” evangelization, in which our diversity is sanctified and purified in its communion in the Church by orienting us toward Christ and therefore to our brethren as well.

Following Christ, who described his sovereign role as “testifying to the Truth”,³ *Ecclesia in America* correctly focuses Catholic evangelization on what matters most:

“In accepting this mission [of the new evangelization], everyone should keep in mind that the vital core of the

³ During Christ’s interrogation by Pilate, John 18:37: “So Pilate said to him, ‘Then you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.’”

new evangelization must be a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the person of Jesus Christ, that is, the preaching of his name, his teaching, his life, his promises and the Kingdom which he has gained for us by his Paschal Mystery.”⁴

The truth communicated in the new evangelization does not change, only *how* it is communicated to people of America.

Recently, our Holy Father presented how we should consider the “content” of the new evangelization.

“In our continuing catechesis for the Year of Faith, we now consider the question of how we are to speak about God to our contemporaries, communicating the Christian faith as a response to the deepest longings of the human heart. This means bringing the God of Jesus Christ to the men and women of our time. It means bearing quiet and humble witness each day to the core of the Gospel message. This is the Good News of the

⁴ *Ecclesia in America*, §66.

God who is Love, who has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ even to the Cross, and who in the Resurrection brings us the hope and promise of eternal life. Jesus gave us an example: by his loving concern for people's questions, struggles and needs, he led them to the Father. In the task of bringing God to our contemporaries, families play a privileged role, for in them the life of faith is lived daily in joy, dialogue, forgiveness and love."⁵

Five centuries ago, our hemisphere was given the perfect example of an inculturated evangelization when Mary appeared to Saint Juan Diego. Her message of reconciliation, unity and love brought forth the great evangelization of an entire hemisphere. By her very presence, Our Lady of Guadalupe became the first and great model of Christian unity presented to all peoples and rising above national and ethnic partisanship. As the mestiza Virgin of Tepeyac she called herself the compassionate mother of "all the

⁵ Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, Paul VI Audience Hall, November 28 2012.

people that live together in this land, and also of all the other various lineages of men.”⁶

And yet the “star of the new evangelization” is an evangelist like no other. She is not, at the moment of encounter with Juan Diego, working out her own salvation. She is the evangelist *par excellence*, in part because she enters the world, as it were, from the beatific vision, a state of supreme closeness to God. Her example and continued motherhood of all peoples is a sure path today for the new evangelization.

Encountering Christ in America: Culture of War, Culture of Death.

One similarity between our culture today and the culture Our Lady of Guadalupe entered, is the expectation of war.

Pope Benedict reminded the bishops of the United States earlier this year, “At the heart of every culture, whether perceived

⁶ *Nican Mopohua*, v. 30-31.

or not, is a consensus about the nature of reality and the moral good, and thus about the conditions for human flourishing.”⁷

The heart of the Mesoamerican culture at the time of the apparitions included an expectation of war and a distorted need for sacrifice. Aztec culture constantly referred back to desolation: “War and Death set the tone for every lecture and ceremony that would accompany the Indigenous all his life.”⁸ To be literal, their perception of reality, articulated through their religion, made war, death and sacrifice conditions for human flourishing. In this worldview the freedom to live was enabled only by war and death. The expectation of war and the necessity of death for some was the daily prerequisite for the human flourishing of Aztec culture.

And yet today—despite having abandoned the assumptions of Aztec religion long ago—contemporary culture remains influenced by similar distortions regarding the prerequisites of human flourishing. Do we not encounter in society and in certain

⁷ Benedict XVI, Address to the Bishops of the United States of America on their “Ad Limina” Visit, January 19, 2012.

⁸ Msgr. Eduardo Chavez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Juan Diego: The Historical Evidence*, Pg. 56.

public policies an unspoken assumption that certain deaths are conditions for human flourishing?

Do we not see in our contemporary culture, a culture which in the words of *Evangelium Vitae*, “it is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak?” Do we not also see with Blessed John Paul II “a structure of sin” in a culture that concludes that “a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another?” And in that culture, “A person who, because of illness, handicap or more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favored tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated.”⁹

This is the very definition of a culture of death, and Blessed John Paul II did not hesitate to tell us so.¹⁰ The encounter with this culture is fundamental to the new evangelization and it is fundamental to the future of the Christianity in our hemisphere.

⁹ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, §12 (1995).

¹⁰ Ibid.

And yet – in *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict reminds us that the seed of hope still exists in the permanent, universal vocation shared by all people. He said: “All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: love and truth never abandon them completely, because these are the vocation planted by God in the heart and mind of every human person.”¹¹ And because of this it is possible for us to be “co-workers” with Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI in speaking about the possibility of a new culture—a culture which they call “a civilization of love” and which Blessed John Paul II recognized in *Ecclesia in America* is brought about by those who are “capable of loving with God’s own love.”¹²

The civilization of love cannot be imposed from above or from outside of a particular historical culture. This is the starting point for an authentic, inculturated new evangelization. And it is precisely why we need to turn our gaze always to Our Lady of Guadalupe—Star of the New Evangelization. And this is also why

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §1.

¹² *Ecclesia in America*, §10.

we may also see Our Lady of Guadalupe under another title as well—Mother of the Civilization of Love.

Mary of Guadalupe as model for all Christians

At Puebla in 1979 Blessed John Paul II described the three pillars necessary for “the present and the future of evangelization.” These three pillars are “the truth about Jesus the Savior”; “the truth about the Church”; and “the truth about man and his dignity.”¹³ But if we want to return to those three truths, Pope Benedict has noted in the past, “it is necessary to go back to Mary.”¹⁴

It seems imperative then to deepen our reflection of *why* we call Mary under the title of Our Lady of Guadalupe “the star of the new evangelization.” Five hundred years ago, Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to the indigenous American peoples as the perfectly inculturated proclamation of the Gospel. The young woman who received the Word in silence and allowed him to bear

¹³ John Paul II, *Address to Third General Conference of Latin American Episcopate*, January 28 1979.

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger and Vittorio Messori, *Ratzinger Report*, 106.

fruit in her was a far more effective evangelizer than those preachers who had attempted to convert a vast new continent.

What we need now, in this critical moment in history, is a radical return to the Source, who is the Lord, and this return cannot take place without something akin to what happened at the earliest beginnings of the proclamation of the Word and to what Our Lady of Guadalupe points.

In the many iconic representations of Pentecost, we see the Church as it was, is, and must continually become. We see the Church in its theological reality—the apostles are gathered around the Mother of God, awaiting the gift of the Spirit who will allow the Word of God to be perfectly inculturated not only in one tongue or on one continent, but in all cultures and for peoples of the earth.

Mary, the holy and immaculate core of the believing Church, teaches us what it means to receive the Word of God, to contemplate him, and to allow him to bear fruit in our lives. In her, we see what it means to beg for and to receive the “intelligent,”

transforming and renewing fire that in the words of our Holy Father allows us to become “light in God.”¹⁵

Mary is the “star of the new evangelization” because she is the contemplative, loving, compassionate, ever faithful presence that allowed the Church to come into being not as a work of man, but as the gift of the God who is Love.

Mary leads to Christ, not herself. As Blessed John Paul II described the Wedding at Cana: “the Mother of Christ presents herself as the spokeswoman of her Son’s will, pointing out those things which must be done so that the salvific power of the Messiah may be manifested.”¹⁶ In this she walks in the spirit of the Jewish prophets, as it were, in that she, like John the Baptist, drew souls to “prepare the way of the Lord, [and to] make straight his paths.”¹⁷

This clarity of purpose—to proclaim the person of Jesus Christ—is apparent again in Our Lady in the Guadalupe

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, Meditation during the First General Congregation, XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 8, 2012.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, §21. Also quoted in *Ecclesia in America*, §11.

¹⁷ Mark 1:3.

apparition. Her initial request to St. Juan Diego is to build a church where she may show her son to all people. She says, according to the *Nican Mopohua*:

“I want very much that they build my sacred little house here, in which I will show Him, I will exalt Him on making Him manifest, I will give Him to all people in all my personal love, Him that is my compassionate gaze, Him that is my help, him that is my salvation.”¹⁸

Authentic Inculturated Evangelization.

In Our Lady of Guadalupe, the native peoples saw a true reflection of themselves and at the same time a perfect expression of a new inculturation of the Christian faith. She communicated eternal, universal truths in the language and custom of the native peoples. Her words, as recorded in the *Nican Mopohua*, show also how she affirmed the seeds of truth in those elements of their culture and history: their appreciation for truth,

¹⁸ Nican Mopohua. V. 26-28.

their belief in a creator and in a divine master of heaven and earth. She also – in a move which overturns the recent tendencies to speak only of the “historical Christ” – abandoned her own historical identity; she assumed the form of the *mestiza*, a child of the inhabitants, and she spoke in their *Nahuatl* language with their rich, varied, formal speech.

The new evangelization, like all evangelization, must be inculturated.

Living in the world but not of the world” is an accurate guide to true inculturation. It includes recognizing the truth in cultures, as well as differentiating between truth and the language in which the truth is communicated. That is: inculturation of communication and tradition, not a conflation of moral values.

It is worthwhile noting that Blessed John Paul II saw the importance of non-essential religious experiences in communicating and nourishing the faith of American Catholics. He called popular piety “a mode of inculturation of the Catholic faith.”

And he urged that, “prudently considered, it too can provide valid cues for a more complete inculturation of the gospel.”¹⁹

An inculturated evangelization speaks to the individual and brings out the relevance that as Pope John Paul said in *Ecclesia in America*, “Jesus Christ is ... the definitive answer to the question of the meaning of life, and to those fundamental questions which still trouble so many men and women on the American continent.”

Here I would mention two specific areas: the role of the laity and charitable witness.

The Role of the Laity.

Reading the signs of life within the Church, I think we can all recognize that our hemisphere is at a pivotal moment in history. Much like the internal reform of the 13th century taken up especially by the Franciscans and Dominicans, whose way of life constituted a return to evangelical principles, today Catholics find

¹⁹ *Ecclesia in America*, §16.

themselves called to evangelization, which in itself constitutes a type of reform of how Catholics live.

This evangelization recognizes the vital contribution of the laity. This does not bestow on the laity a new mission, but rather awakens the laity to the mission of Baptism – the vocation of holiness and the vocation to evangelize.

It is significant that Juan Diego and his uncle were laymen. Their dedication to the faith is apparent in Juan Diego going often to the far away chapel for instruction, as well as his insistence on putting the salvation of his dying uncle first.

The laity also had a greater role in evangelization after the apparitions of Our Lady. In spreading word of the apparition and of the faith which gave such a compassionate encounter with God, lay men and women helped account for the conversion of millions.

In our day, a central aspect of the work of the laity is their role as stewards of the Christian family and therefore of the domestic Church.

Because of the central importance of the family not only to its individual members but also to society and culture, the new evangelization must contain at its core the recovery of a sacramental understanding of Christian marriage. If the new evangelization is to be an incarnate proclamation of the beauty of God, who is communion, and of the Church who is the sacrament of this communion, it cannot but have at its center the domestic church. This is so not only because the family is the “model place” where the faith is transmitted to new generations, or where Christian values are lived.

Our faith teaches us that God is a unity in communion, a Trinity, that he is love. God made an irrevocable gift of himself to us in his Son Jesus Christ, who is his covenant with his creation. And because man is made in the image of God, he “is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless” if he does not encounter this love.²⁰

²⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §10 (1979).

Millions of people who have yet to encounter God's love need the Christian family to be an icon of the God who is communion. They need to see all the elements of human life finding fulfillment in the Son of God made man. They need to see families that are truly *human* communities, which can thus point their unbelieving brothers and sisters to the beauty of the God who is love.

This is why Blessed John Paul II taught us that the family is *essentially missionary*. Its mission, which flows from its being, precedes any external activities of evangelization to which Christian families may commit themselves. Every such activity bears authentic, evangelical fruit when it flows from the foundational mission that places the family founded on sacramental marriage at the heart of the mission of the Church.

In the words of Blessed John Paul II, "the family has *the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love*" – the love that is a reflection of the Trinitarian communion and that shares in "God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the

Church His bride.”²¹ Only when the Christian family is strengthened in this its most basic mission can take its place at the heart of the Church’s task of evangelization.

We cannot, in carrying forward the mission of the new evangelization, proclaim “the truth about man and his dignity” unless we proclaim with courage and conviction the truth about marriage and family.

From what has just been said it is obvious that chief among these building blocks for the new evangelization is the Second Vatican Council’s *universal call to holiness*.²² This call is truly *universal*, embracing all states of life and all peoples of the earth. It seems to me necessary to stress both this call of God and our response to it as fundamental to the New Evangelization²³ and in this we see an extraordinary example in the life of St. Juan Diego.

In the message of Our Lady of Guadalupe and in the life of St. Juan Diego, it is manifest that this call for a new assimilation

²¹ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, §17 (1981).

²² Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, ch. 5 (1962).

²³ *Ecclesia in America*, no. 33.

and proclamation of the Gospel embraces the Church as a whole, and every people and nation in which she is present.

What is needed is not simply new pastoral initiatives to those who no longer embrace Christianity— though such outreach is of course imperative. The new evangelization must be broader and also more positive in scope. While it may be prompted by, it cannot simply be determined by the crisis of our age.

This renewed impulse of evangelization involves a fundamental reappropriation of our faith by the whole Church, and a thoroughly incarnate proclamation of it to the men and women of our time. It requires what we might describe as a “radical” return to the Source—a renewed living out of the fullness of the faith. In other words, what is called for is what we see in the life of St. Juan Diego: a courageous witness of holiness. It is in this way that as Blessed John Paul II stated in *Christifideles Laici*, the

laity have an “*essential and irreplaceable role*” in the work of the new evangelization.²⁴

The holiness of lives formed and strengthened by the sacraments and lived in total faithfulness to the Church and in commitment to Jesus Christ is the only way to reconstitute a Catholic identity. It is the only way for the Church to bear credible witness, in her institutions and in each of her members, to a world mortally hungry for the presence of the living God.

Charity that evangelizes.

Finally, the method that speaks strongest of Christ is love, in all its forms, beginning with the family and extending to the more general, but nevertheless urgent, concern for those who are poor and who suffer.

The Western Hemisphere is fertile ground for the seed of charity. All of our countries are experiencing some degree of turmoil. Christ himself explained: the poor we will have until the

²⁴ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, no. 7 (1988).

end of the world, and their many types of poverty we recognize. There is also the silent turmoil of complacent obliviousness to others, of obsession with materialism, which blind hearts from seeing what the God of Jesus Christ has revealed: namely, “our grandeur as persons redeemed by love and called, in the Church, to renew the city of man, so that it can become the city of God.”²⁵ Only by building a civilization of love can Catholics help build the authentic solidarity described in *Ecclesia in America*.

Our Lady of Guadalupe’s vision of the future chapel communicates the charitable warmth of the Church—a charitable warmth which everyone in the Church is called to extend. As the Holy Father wrote in *Deus Caritas Est*, “The Church is God’s family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life.” And at the same time we are reminded that “*caritas-agape* extends beyond the frontiers of the Church.”²⁶

More than anything, life without God or life without an authentic understanding of God, finds suffering to be the question

²⁵ Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, Paul VI Audience Hall, November 28 2012.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* no. 25(b) (2005).

without an answer. The new evangelization needs a renewed experience of sacrifice, bound up in an understanding of redemptive suffering as well as a solidarity of the heart with those who suffer. In this way too, the new evangelization calls us to “a charity that evangelizes.”²⁷

Christ said the world would know we are Christian by the way we love one another. We should be prepared to let charity be our measure of the new evangelization. In the first chapter of *Ecclesia in America*, Blessed John Paul II recalled the words of his predecessor at the close of the Second Vatican Council: “on the face of every human being, especially when marked by tears and sufferings, we can and must see the face of Christ.”²⁸ This is the inescapable prerequisite for a new evangelization. But perhaps we may be permitted to add that the new evangelization calls us to a further realization: that every human being especially when marked by tears and suffering, must be able to see the caring face of Christ in those he has called to follow him.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, no. 33 (2003).

²⁸ *Ecclesia in America*, no 12.

In closing, permit me one further observation concerning the new evangelization in a time of globalization. The clash of civilizations that occurred on the American continent between the Spanish and the Native Americans in some ways highlighted the worst aspects of each culture. The Spanish witnessed the brutal human sacrifices of the Aztecs, while the Aztecs witnessed some of the Spanish authorities behaving brutally toward them, and even threatening Bishop Zumarraga. It was into this context of cultural conflict that our Lady of Guadalupe appeared as a *mestiza* – the embodiment of both cultures, and as an appeal to what was best in both.

This was what Pope John Paul II called in *Ecclesia in America* “a perfectly inculturated evangelization.” (11) It was the first step toward bringing together two different cultures under the mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Gospel of her son, Jesus Christ. Not only did Our Lady of Guadalupe appear as a mixture of both races, but the man she appeared to, Juan Diego was a humble native. Yet it was not enough that she appeared to

him, or even that she left her image. For the work of evangelization to take root in America required that Juan Diego – a Native Mexican – work with Bishop Zumarraga – a Spaniard to spread her message of love and reconciliation.

In one way, it is not surprising that Our Lady of Guadalupe would bring together cultures while bringing people to her son. From the first days of Christianity, and even during Christ's life, it was clear that his message of salvation was not only for one group, but for all who were open to it. Wherever they may have come from originally, those early Christians found a unity in Christ that transcended all cultural differences. And Our Lady of Guadalupe has helped her son to do the same in America.

As we work for a New Evangelization, this lesson is important. We cannot approach another culture from a relativistic point of view. We cannot say every aspect of every culture is equally good. Nor should we be dismissive of cultures different from our own or see differences as necessarily negative. In other words, care must be taken to avoid what Pope Benedict laid out

as two dangers arising from the “increased commercialization of cultural exchange”: 1) cultural eclecticism, and 2) cultural leveling.

In cultural eclecticism, cultural groups "are simply placed alongside one another and viewed as substantially equivalent and interchangeable" often with the effect that they remain separate with neither authentic dialogue nor integration. It sees cultures relativistically and therefore eliminates the need to learn from one another, to listen to the particular song of truth expressed in a culture.

The second danger, cultural leveling, "indiscriminately accepts types of conduct and life-styles, losing sight of the profound significance of the culture...and traditions of different peoples, by which the individual defines himself in relation to life's fundamental questions."²⁹ The result is often that one culture is subsumed by another, becoming deaf to one's history and being silent in cultural dialogue.

Pope Benedict concludes that:

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 6.

“What eclecticism and cultural leveling have in common is the separation of culture from human nature. Thus, cultures can no longer define themselves within a nature that transcends them, and man ends up being reduced to a mere cultural statistic. When this happens, humanity runs new risks of enslavement and manipulation.”³⁰

As people of faith, we must chart a different course. We must take the opportunity to find cultural unity through a shared religious identity and value system. The truth the Church has to offer the world does not hinder cultural development, it fulfills it. But in preaching to cultures that either don't know Christ or have forgotten him, Juan Diego's witness is very important. In a cultural context where the Church is seen as preaching from “outside” the culture, the witness of the laity and of all Christians *inside* the culture is critical. This was the witness of the first Christians that sparked an interest in Christianity in this very city in what we

³⁰ Ibid.

might call the first wave of evangelization. This is the model that converted the entire American continent. And this is the model for the New Evangelization as well, not only in America, but throughout the world.

Ecclesia in America closes with words which aptly embody the meaning of our meeting today: “Teach us to love your Mother, Mary, as you loved her. Give us strength to proclaim your word with courage in the work of the new evangelization so that the world may know new hope. Our Lady of Guadalupe, pray for us!”³¹

³¹ *Ecclesia in America*, §76.