



Fourth Week of Advent (Sunday Year A) – Reflection Mgr Daniel McHugh
18 & 19 December 2022

“Emmanuel, God is with us.”

Some years ago I was privileged to travel to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. It came about because of the association which the Archbishop of Los Angeles had with that part of the Catholic world. Together with the Archbishop of Birmingham I was hosted at the Clergy House in Gaudalupe, which is on the outskirts of Mexico City.

What struck me most of all was the large numbers of people going there to pray on pilgrimage. On December 9 1531, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to an Indian convert named Juan Diego, and left him with an image of Mary imprinted upon his cloak. The image was placed in a magnificent shrine where it became an object of great devotion and was accompanied by many miracles, and excited great piety of the Mexican nation toward the Mother of God. As devotion increased, she was chosen as the principal Patroness of Mexico. Today she is honoured as the Patroness of the Americas.

As the Church celebrated the Feast of Our Lady of Gaudalupe on Monday this week, Pope Francis presided over Mass in the St Peter’s Basilica: in his Homily, the Pope recalled God’s closeness as shown through the Mother of his Son. “In Jesus born of Mary”, he said, “the Eternal one enters the precariousness of our time, becomes forever and irreversibly ‘God-with-us’, and walks beside as brother and companion”. Turning to the apparitions of Gaudalupe, the Pope said, “Nearly five centuries ago, at a complicated and difficult time for the inhabitants of the New World, the Lord wanted to transform the upheaval bought about by the encounter between two different worlds into a recovery of meaning and dignity, into openness to the Gospel.”

I found this quote from Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI tweeted by Quang D. Tran, S.J. especially significant in the light of remarks of Pope Frances: “In Mexico, at first, absolutely nothing could be done about Missionary work until.....Gaudalupe, and then the Son was suddenly near by the way of his Mother.....and suddenly the Christian religion no longer wears the terrible face of conquest, but the kindly face of the Mother”. This was the first time in Western Catholic history where the Mother of God appeared in the image of the native peoples. The story explores themes of class, identity and faith. She presented herself to Juan Diego, a new Catholic convert who was the lowest of the Aztec class, speaking his native tongue while resembling his people. This was at time of conquest where the indigenous population was thought of as less. In her fourth apparition Our Lady of Gaudalupe said: “let not your heart be disturbed. Do not fear that sickness, nor any other sickness or anguish. Am I not here, who is your Mother? Are you not under my protection?”. She has always been of the people, which has become significantly important to the Mexican-American experience that has historically not been represented or acknowledged because of its mixed race.

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The Pope in his address this week connected the apparitions of Our Lady of Gaudalupe to our own troubled times. He recalled the “rumbling of war, growing injustice, famine, poverty and suffering” which makes our horizon “bleak and disconcerting”. Despite these many omens of desolation, said the Pope, God reminds us that even now is a “propitious time of salvation” as the Lord calls us to embrace fraternity and set aside selfishness.

The image of Our Lady of Gaudalupe is of the Pregnant Mother to be: the only such image I know of Mary. As we seek to be ready to celebrate the Birth of her Son, Mary asks us to open our lives to Him and to welcome His message, so as to learn to love like Him. Speaking off the cuff, Pope Francis recalled the many peoples in the Americas who endure “poverty, exploitation, socio-economic and cultural colonization” “Mary is in the midst of the caravans that come in search of freedom travelling northward”, he said.

My mind turns to closer to home: to the people crossing the Channel; to the pickets across the road from me at the Hospital this morning. We do live in challenging times, and we need to trust in God’s love, that Mary had in saying “yes” to the coming of her Son into our lives this Christmas. We turn to St Joseph too: the Birth of Jesus challenged his Faith. These words of Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI appeal to me “let us allow ourselves to be filled with St Joseph’s silence! In a world that is often too noisy, that encourages neither recollection nor listening to God’s voice, we are in such deep need of it”.

In company with Our Blessed Mother Mary and St Joseph we enter prayerfully into the final week leading to the celebration of the Birth of the Child Jesus. We journey with those who can guide us best to the welcome of our Saviour who will transform our lives. “His name will be called Emmanuel”. God is with us.

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