“The Power of the Beauty of Our Blessed Mother to Unite All of God’s Children”
Sermon for the Mass of the Americas
Celebrated in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
November 16, 2019

Introduction

In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, directly over the very spot where our Lord’s Cross stood, right where our Savior died for our salvation, there stands a Greek altar. Directly next to it stands a Latin altar. In between the two altars hangs an icon of the Mother of God. Right at that point of encounter, where she stood 2,000 years ago at the foot of the Cross, she now stands uniting East and West, Greek and Latin. She is our Mother, whom we all venerate, and she wants us, her children, her Son’s disciples, to be one. And she continues to intercede for us for this intention, that her Son’s dying wish may be fulfilled: “that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us” (Jn 17:21).

Mother of Unity

This Mass we celebrate today, the “Mass of the Americas,” speaks profoundly to the power of our Mother to unite her children. She stands there in every generation of the Church, interceding to her Son for her children, actively leading them to him, united as one in him. Actively: she has appeared in every corner of the earth all throughout history, especially in turbulent and threatening moments of history, making herself present to her children to both admonish and console, to exhort and reveal, to call both to prayer and to
pentence, so that all of her children might be led more deeply into the heart of her Son, that “they may be one.”

The story of our Immaculate Mother’s apparition on our continent in 1531 to a poor, illiterate and devout indigenous man by the name of Juan Diego is well known to us, as is the story of the massive conversions to her Son after her appearance there at Tepeyac. She appeared at a time of great conflict, turbulence and bloodshed, to form a new Christian people for her Son, not by the sword nor by human sacrifice, but by the love of a mother who identifies herself with her children. And so it is that the Aztecs saw in the image of the woman on Juan Diego’s tilma one of their own: she wore a cloak of turquoise, an honor reserved to Aztec gods and the Aztec royal family, and she is being carried, another sign of honor accorded to the ruling family of the Aztec empire. But she is more than a princess: the stars decorate her mantle; she is more prominent than the sun; and she stands on the crescent moon. Her head is bowed and her hands are folded in humble supplication – exalted though she is beyond all others, she worships one more powerful than herself. And she wears a dark band of maternity, indicating that she is carrying a child. Her brooch is a cross. This illustrious yet humble woman is the Mother of God’s Son, “the handmaid of the Lord” whose whole being proclaims the greatness of the one true God.

But the Spaniards, too, came to accept the appearance of this woman as the one they knew to be the Mother of the Son of the God they worshipped, because they saw in her an image of the Immaculate Conception: they saw in this image the woman in the Book of Genesis who crushes the serpent’s head – that is, after the fall of our first parents God promised that Eve’s descendant would crush the Evil One so that he would not keep a hold on God’s people. But they also saw in this image the woman in the last book of the Bible,
the Book of Revelation, the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, and with child about to give birth (Rev 12:1-2). So the Spaniards saw in this image the Lady they venerated as the Immaculate Conception, a dogma their theologians had championed and their artists had depicted with poignant beauty for centuries before Pope Pius IX declared it as such in 1854. After Tepeyac, Mexico became Catholic: Our Lady of Guadalupe unites the Old World and the New, and so a new Christian people is formed from the two, a mestizo people; a new Christian civilization is born from the union brought about by her who is venerated as both la Morenita and la Inmaculada.

The significance of this unparalleled historical event, especially for our part of the world – the Americas – was not lost on Pope St. John Paul II. In his Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in America (n. 11), he writes:

The appearance of Mary to the native Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac in 1531 had a decisive effect on evangelization. Its influence greatly overflows the boundaries of Mexico, spreading to the whole Continent. America, which historically has been, and still is, a melting-pot of peoples, has recognized in the mestiza face of the Virgin of Tepeyac, ‘in Blessed Mary of Guadalupe, an impressive example of a perfectly inculturated evangelization’.

Mother of the Church

This speaks to another aspect of the mystery of our Blessed Mother marked by today’s celebration. In these recent decades of the Church, more attention has been focused on Our Lady as an image, or icon, of the Church. Much light was cast on this insight by the
teaching of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which highlighted St. Ambrose’s teaching on this topic. The Council says in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (nn. 63-64):

As St. Ambrose taught, the Mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ…. The Church indeed, contemplating [the Mother of God’s] hidden sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By her preaching she brings forth to a new and immortal life the sons who are born to her in baptism, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God. She herself is a virgin, who keeps the faith given to her by her Spouse whole and entire. Imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she keeps with virginal purity an entire faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity.

The Church is our mother: a mother welcomes, nourishes, consoles and unites. Where do newcomers in a strange land turn when they feel disoriented, afraid or unwelcomed? They turn to the Church. For Catholics especially, the Church is home wherever they are in the world. And those who are poor or suffering in any way or in a traumatic period of crisis, even if they rarely darken the door of a church building, when the time comes to seek relief they will come to the Church, knowing that the people there will not turn them away, but succor them in their need.
To some it might seem hypocrisy to speak of care for the poor in the midst of this elaborate liturgy taking place in such an ornate house of worship. Of course, what comes to mind immediately is the story of the mysterious woman with the alabaster jar of perfumed oil, who, in an act of extreme extravagance, pours out the exorbitantly expensive ointment upon the head of Jesus in a gesture of anointing. We know how the story goes: to the naysayers who complain about such a huge waste, when the oil could have been sold and the money given to the poor, Jesus retorts: “The poor you will always have with you; but you will not always have me.”

But coming from San Francisco as I do, another more recent and local example comes to mind. This was in the early 1970’s, just months after the dedication of the brand new St. Mary’s Cathedral, when none other than Dorothy Day went there to take part in a meeting being held in the conference center under the church. Not surprisingly (especially given that moment of history) one such naysayer spoke up, complaining that their meeting to discuss the needs of the poor was taking place in such an extravagant edifice. Many cheered him on, but Dorothy Day was not one of them. She forthrightly said:

The Church has an obligation to feed the poor, and we cannot spend all our money on buildings. However, there are many kinds of hunger. There is a hunger for bread, and we must give people food. But there is also a hunger for beauty – and there are very few beautiful places that the poor can get into. Here is a place of transcendent beauty, and it is as accessible to the homeless in the Tenderloin as it is to the mayor of San Francisco.
Truth, Beauty and Goodness

We must do many things to serve the poor, and certainly attending to their material needs is one of them. But as the Servant of God Dorothy Day points out, we must also feed their soul. Perhaps what the poor most lack in their lives is beauty: being dignified by that beauty which ennobles and elevates the soul, assuring them of their equal dignity as a fellow child of God whom God created in His image and likeness. It is not hyperbole, then, to say that what we do today is a service to the poor. As Dorothy Day would have it, the poorest person on the streets of our nation’s capital has access to this magnificent church built to the glory of God, access to the profoundly beautiful music, access to the beauty of the ritual.

There is another sense, though, to what we do today being a service to the poor, for there are many kinds of poverty. Economic poverty is only one. There is also spiritual poverty, a poverty of the soul. The absence of beauty and prevalence of the ugly eventually corrupts a soul, leading to spiritual misery. This is indicative of a spiritual disease affecting our society today, the signs of which are all around us: anger, irrational intolerance toward those with different points of view, predation upon those in a disadvantaged power differential, an epidemic of depression. We live in the most affluent society in the history of the world, and what is the result? Anger, division, injustice and depression.

The Church in her wisdom has always understood that truth, beauty and goodness are all necessary to repair a broken society and build a flourishing civilization. These, indeed, are the three pillars upon which the Church built Western civilization and has given so much to the world. Goodness alone won’t work, for without truth it will at best only soothe the symptoms of suffering, but not get to the root causes; neither will truth alone work, for the truth needs to be translated into concrete action and expressed through the power of beauty.
All three are necessary, because the human person is an integral whole: goodness feeds the body, truth feeds the mind, and beauty feeds the soul. Perhaps it is the service of beauty that is most lacking in the world today, which explains the spiritual malaise in which we find ourselves. Truly, we can do no better than to dedicate ourselves to the service of beauty, reclaiming its power to heal and unite.

Conclusion

We are happy to come together today to offer something beautiful to God and to express our love for the Mother of His Son: we give our best, because we are motivated by love, which settles for nothing less. And here our Blessed Mother is once again uniting us: the poor with the well-to-do and the in between, from every nation, race, people and tongue.

Long ago and far away she stood at the foot of the Cross as her Son offered his life to bring about the greatest reconciliation of all: sinful humanity with its Creator. She modeled what her Son taught: that there is no unity without the Cross. To those with the eyes of faith, beauty looks very different: it looks humble, self-sacrificial, other/Other-centered. She is all-beautiful, because she reflects the beauty of her Creator, her Son and her Spouse. She is the model of the humility that we need in order to fulfill her Son’s dying wish, “that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us.”