

Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church

Advent Parish Mission (December 11-12, 2017)
“Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Invisible Made Visible”
with Father Thomas J. Loya, STB, MA

Summary for Continued Reflection

Far from being reduced to a “religion,” a “bunch of rules” or even “teachings” the Catholic Faith is really about a way of seeing—seeing the invisible, uncontainable, ineffable, immeasurable, incomprehensible God become visible through the physical order that He himself set in place. This is the Great Mystery, hidden from all ages but now revealed. This is the ONE and ONLY mystery from which all things come. It is the mystery of the Incarnation whereby God, who is pure spirit, takes on flesh. The Fathers of the Eastern Catholic Churches say that the birth of Christ, the Incarnation, is God’s “Divine Condescension”—the kenosis or ‘self-emptying’ of God.

The birth as a baby in the manger was only the beginning of the greater reality. The greater reality is that God has infused Himself into every aspect of His own creation which means that all things in creation are sacramental, revelatory—all creation reveals God. Through physical matter we can actually touch God. We can become grafted on to God’s very nature and become one with Him (2 Peter 1:4). This comes to its perfection in the Eucharist.

If God is in all things, especially the human person, and we can actually perceive that reality, then that vision determines how we interface with all of reality. For example, we do not need to be ‘environmentalist’ to respect the environment. The environment (nature) is shot through with the presence of God. Therefore, the only appropriate, honest and reasonable response to the environment is to respect it, preserve it, and never to pollute, abuse or recklessly consume it. But this same “Incarnational” vision is to be applied to all of reality from the environment to the human person to the economy, to healthcare, to marriage and family, to the single life, to human sexuality, to Church attendance, to global politics, to education—to EVERY aspect and moment of life everywhere and at all times. Most especially the Incarnational vision should determine how husbands and wives relate to one another.

It is Providential that during the Advent season as we prepare for the Incarnation, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe is observed. This Feast commemorates the appearance of the Mother of God to Juan Diego in 1531 AD in what today is Mexico City. During these appearances, the Mother of God herself, with her own hands, created an image on the tilma (robe) of Juan Diego. This image remains intact to this day nearly 500 years later and after exhaustive study by experts of all kinds, this image cannot be explained except by a supernatural explanation.

As the Invisible God Incarnated Himself among us at his birth, so too did the Mother of God Incarnate herself among the pagan Aztec Indians through the rich imagery and symbols that she included in the image of herself on Juan Diego’s tilma. Every square inch of this image was purposely designed by the Mother of God with images and symbols that were recognizable to the pagan Aztecs. But, at the same time, every Aztec image is accompanied by a secondary meaning

in which the Mother of God is pointing to a greater reality, to the true God, the one and only pleasing Sacrifice of God's Only-Begotten Son instead of the countless human blood sacrifices practiced by the Aztecs to appease their false gods.

Like the image that the Mother of God painted on the tilma of Juan Diego, so too does all of the imagery, the art, architecture, liturgy and music of the Church Incarnate the presence of the Living God and the mysteries of our Faith. In the Byzantine Catholic Divine Office for the Christmas season, through dogmatic hymns, a question is posed to us—what gift can we possibly offer in response to the immeasurable gift of the Incarnation which God has given to us? The answer to this question is to offer back to God the same gift He gave to us, the same gift we see in the downward, tilted head of the Mother of God in the tilma image—humility and deferential love.

Humility is probably the most illusive and scarce virtue of our times which are marked by a staggering arrogance and self-centeredness. Deferential love is the type of love we might imagine in the life and household of the Holy Family. It is a love that puts the OTHER person first at all times and in every moment. Deferential love does not blame, accuse or say things like this:

— “If you would just stop doing (this or that) or start doing (this or that) things would be better.”

— “You make me mad!

— “Look at all of THAT traffic!!!”

— “You are ALWAYS doing....”

— “EVERYTIME I try to....”

— “I NEVER get...”

— “You NEVER...”

— “I cannot STAND...”

— “I HATE....”

Rather, deferential love is about always dying to self and making it about the other person. Deferential love asks these questions:

— “I'm sorry, maybe I did not hear you correctly. Can you tell me again what you wanted?”

— “I feel anger when this (or that) happens or (this or that) does not happen. Maybe I have a certain hypersensitivity to this or that, or maybe I need to look at why I become angry at this or that. Maybe I need to adjust my perception of things. (Note: Deferential love never says, “You MADE me angry.”)

— “Is there any other way that I can interpret the event or interpret his or her behavior?”

— “Am I ‘catastrophizing’ or ‘awfulizing’ this event or behavior—making it bigger or more important in my own mind than it is in reality?”

— “Anger is a defense mechanism within us that is triggered when we sense something is being threatened. When I feel anger I will ask myself, what is it that is being threatened? What am I trying to defend or protect? Should I be defending and protecting this or that? Is it worth being defended? When I reflect on the source of my anger, nine times out of ten I will discover that the source of my anger is rooted in pride, in a lack of humility—“I can never be wronged, slighted, imposed upon, inconvenienced, etc. in any way!!” St. Basil the Great said that we get angry because we “think too highly of ourselves.”

Key Points:

To practice real humility and deferential love, we always, always, in every moment, ask ourselves this simple question: “How can I make a gift of myself in THIS MOMENT to THIS person? What does this person in THIS moment need me to be?”

We ask ourselves this question regardless of what we think or feel about this person, regardless of what this person has done to us. A person may not want to be given what they need. However real love always does what is BEST for the OTHER person REGARDLESS OF THE COST TO OURSELF. We do not act on our feelings. We act on what we know is RIGHT. Our feelings are only indicators of our thought processes and beliefs. Feelings do not determine our behavior. Rather we do what is RIGHT regardless of our feelings. When we do what is right, our feelings will often catch up with our rightful actions and intentions but we do not ‘wait’ for our feelings in the meantime. We offer that gift of self in THIS moment. This is how we imitate the Incarnational gift of Christ as modeled by our Blessed Mother and seen so dramatically in the very image she created of herself on the tilma of Juan Diego.

Deferential love makes it first and foremost about the person and not about winning an argument or proving someone wrong. Deferential love requires us to humbly “Incarnate” ourselves among someone. In deferential love, we try to find what deeper value a person may be committed to even if we know their way of achieving this value may be flawed or misguided. Just as the Blessed Mother did with the Aztec people through the symbols on her image on the tilma, we try to first make a connection with the other person on the level of the person and not on the level of the ‘argument’ or issue. Only when we have “dwelt among them” as Christ did by becoming human, can we then point someone in a different and better direction. This is precisely what the Mother of God did with her appearance and image at Guadalupe.

Suggested Follow-Up Actions:

— Put aside so much of the shopping, decorating, baking, cooking. Our culture defines Christmas exclusively with these things. They are alright but in the way that crumbs are alright from a loaf of bread. The crumbs might be tasty in themselves but do we go to the

store to buy the crumbs of a loaf of bread or do we seek to buy the loaf? This Christmas commit to having the LOAF of bread and not just the crumbs. The loaf of bread is the actual peace of the Incarnation in our own souls first and then applied to every moment, and person in our life beginning with our marriages.

- Meditate on the Liturgical texts from the Byzantine Catholic Divine Office (Please see the last pages of this packet for these texts). Seek to have a ‘Christmas within Christmas’. This means, seek to really be imbued, inspired by the actual reality of the Incarnation. See everything as gift. Seek to be a gift and touch everything in life with this Sacramental, Eucharistic, mystical, Incarnational, *i.e.* *CATHOLIC worldview*.
- Meditate on the image of our Lady of Guadalupe. Eucharistic adoration is of course a good practice. However, meditating upon an icon such as the Image of our Lady of Guadalupe can also reveal to us the mysteries of our Faith and make God truly present to us.
- During the remaining days of Advent do the opposite of what our culture tells us: Stop all of the excessive indulging and taking on. Stop all of the “Christmas parties.” Stop being ruled by the counterfeit Christmas. Rather, pull back—fast from meat and dairy products (from the “fatty” foods that are meant for celebrations. Christ has not come YET, during Advent. So why all of the partying and indulgence BEFORE the actual event itself of Christ’s birth!?!? This is actually pagan practices and NOT Christian.
- Make that gift of self to our parish. This is a time of renewal. How can I help to bring about any type of renewed life in my own parish?
- Invite a fallen away Catholic family member to give Church and God another chance.

What good was our exhausting and often aggravating experience of Christmas and with all due respects to the gift giving, what good was all of this when on December 26th we wake up being the same person we were before Christmas, the same wounds, strife, broken relationships, attitudes, etc. are still with us, still the same? We may have celebrated the “Holidays” but we did NOT experience CHRISTSMAS. The whole purpose of the Christ’s Condescension, the Incarnation is so that we would be transformed, redeemed, wounds and relationships healed, attitudes changed, our lives, marriages, families renewed. Christ came to renew mankind, to make all things filled with His presence, not so that we would rush to stores to buy and exchange gifts, drink and eat a lot and get into arguments at the dinner table with relatives and friends about politics.

Do what God did at His Incarnation and what the Blessed Mother modeled for us at Guadalupe: Give the gift of self, of our real presence to people. Give to others the reality of the Incarnation that lives within ourselves. A store bought or even handmade gift can indeed be meaningful. But a gift of this kind is only a symbol of love. Why not give the actual gift of deferential love itself? Simply put—HUMILITY. *Christ is Born! Glorify Him!*

Father Thomas J. Loya can be heard live on “Light of the East” radio program or by podcast at <http://byzantinecatholic.com/podcast/>.

Liturgical Texts from the Byzantine Catholic Divine Office for the Christmas Season

From Vespers on Christmas Eve:

O Christ, what shall we offer You for your coming on earth in our humanity for our sake? Every creature that has its being from You gives thanks to You: the angels offer hymns of praise, the heavens a star; the Magi present their gifts and the shepherds, their wonder; the earth provides a cave and the desert a manger. As for us, we offer a Virgin Mother. O God who are from all eternity, have mercy on us.

When Augustus become supreme ruler of the world, the many kingdoms among people came to an end. Likewise, when You became incarnate of the Immaculate One, the worship of many gods has to cease. The cities came under universal power, and the Gentiles believed in one supreme Divinity. Nations were registered in the name of Caesar Augustus, and we, the faithful, were registered in Your Divine name, O Incarnate One. O Lord, great is your mercy; glory to You!

Come, let us rejoice in the Lord; let us proclaim the present mystery by which the partition has been broken and the flaming sword withheld. Now the Cherubim shall let us all come to the Tree of Life. As for me, I am returning to the bliss of Paradise from which I had been banished by disobedience. Behold! the Image of the Father and his unchangeable eternity has taken the form of a servant. Without suffering He has come forth to us from an all-pure Virgin, and yet He has remained unchanged. He is true God as He was before, and He has taken on himself what He had not been, becoming man out of his love for all. Therefore, let us raise our voices in hymns, singing: O God, born of the Virgin, have mercy on us.

From the Matins of December 25:

I contemplate a divine and marvelous mystery: heaven has become a cave; the throne of Cherubim a Virgin, and the manger, an honorable place in which lies Christ God, the incomprehensible. Let us praise and extol Him.

When the Creator saw the one whom He created with his own hands perishing, He lowered the heavens and came down; He took upon Himself human nature from the most holy and pure Virgin, truly becoming flesh; for this season, we glorify Him.

From the Compline of December 25:

Today Heaven and earth unite, for Christ is born. Today God came to earth in the flesh, and mankind was lifted up to the heavens. Today, for the sake of all, He is seen in the flesh, the One who by nature is invisible. Let us glorify Him singing: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, which your coming has bestowed on us. O Savior, glory to You!

...The Virgin is now more spacious than the Heavens.

From the Vespers of December 26:

How shall I tell of this great mystery? He who is without flesh become incarnate; the Word puts on a body; the Invisible is seen; He whom no hand can touch is carried; and He who knows no beginning now begins to be. The Son of God becomes the Son of Man; Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.