

NO UNITY WITHOUT THE CROSS

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In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, directly over the spot where our Lord's Cross stood, there stands a Greek altar. Directly next to it is a Latin altar, and 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 her Son's disciples to be one. She continues to intercede 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" (John 17:21).

This Mass we celebrate today, the "Mass of the Americas," speaks to the power of our Mother to unite her children. She stands there in every generation of the Church, interceding for her children and actively leading them to her Son, that they may be united as one in him. Throughout history she has appeared in every corner of the earth, especially in turbulent and threatening moments, making herself present to her children to both admonish and console, to exhort and reveal, to call both to

prayer and to penance, so that all of her children might be led more deeply into the heart of her Son.

The story of our Immaculate Mother's apparition on our continent in 1531 to a poor, illiterate, and devout indigenous man named Juan Diego is well known to us, as is the story of the massive conversions to her Son after her appearance 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. 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 for Aztec gods and the Aztec royal family, and she was being carried, another sign of honor accorded to the ruling family of the Aztec empire.

But she is more than a princess: Stars decorate Our Lady of Guadalupe's mantle, 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 the Son of God, "the handmaid of the Lord" whose whole being proclaims the greatness of the one true God.

The Spaniards, too, came to accept the appearance of this woman as the Mother of their Incarnate God, 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. But they also saw in it the woman in 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). 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 venerated as both *la Morenita* and *la Inmaculada*.

The significance of this unparalleled historical event, especially in the Americas, was not lost on Pope St. John Paul II. In his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, 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."

In recent decades, more attention has been focused on Our Lady as an image, or icon, of the Church. The Second

Vatican Council highlighted St. Ambrose's teaching on this topic. The Council says in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

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 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 like hypocrisy to speak of care for the poor in such an ornate house of worship. We must remember the story of the mysterious woman with the

alabaster jar of perfumed oil, who pours out the exorbitantly expensive ointment upon Jesus's head. To the naysayers who complain that 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.”

Coming from San Francisco as I do, another example comes to mind. In the early 1970s, just months after the dedication of the brand-new St. Mary's Cathedral, none other than Dorothy Day went there to take part in a meeting held in the conference center under the church. Not surprisingly, one naysayer spoke up, complaining because their meeting to discuss the needs of the poor was taking place in an extravagant edifice. Many cheered him on, but Day was not one of them. She 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.

We must do many things to serve the poor, and certainly attending to their material needs is one of them. But as Day points out, we must also feed their souls. Perhaps what the poor most lack in their lives is beauty: that beauty which ennobles and elevates the soul, assuring them of their dignity as children of God whom he 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 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.

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 beauty that is most lacking in the world today, which explains the spiritual malaise in which we find ourselves. We must dedicate ourselves to the service of beauty, reclaiming its power to heal and unite.

Today we come together to offer something beautiful to God and to express our love for the Mother of His Son. 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-centered and Other-centered. Our Lady is 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."