Remarks to the Bishops on Our Lady of Guadalupe
On the Approaching 500th Anniversary of the Apparition
(17 November 2026)

I would like to begin this brief consideration by recommending to each of you the recent pastoral letter published by Archbishop José Gomez to his people in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The letter is entitled "Wonder of America". The Archbishop writes thoughtfully and movingly on the mystery of Our Lady of Guadalupe. You will find his letter helpful far beyond what I say here.

She appeared as the Mother of the Word Incarnate, with the child yet in her womb, to a recently baptized indigenous widower of about 57 years old, with a sick uncle. Juan Diego's maternal tongue was **Náhuatl**. And when the Virgin appeared to him he saw that he shared her complexion, and heard her speak in his language, as a mother. The oldest account of the events, the ***Nican Mopohua***, was written in **Náhuatl**, probably about 25 years after the apparition.

In 1531, barely 12 years after Hernán Cortéz had reached and toppled the capital of the Aztec empire, Juan Diego, by the Virgin's sending, reported the event of the apparition to the bishop of Mexico City. Fray Juan de **Zumárraga** OFM was at that time the bishop-elect. He was not actually consecrated bishop until 1533. He also held the office of "Protector of the Indians," an office created and filled by royal decree.

The bishop was by no means a perfect man, but he was a good man. A Franciscan, he was a fierce defender of the dignity of the indigenous population. As a Spanish Franciscan, he was also a fierce defender of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. He was, at the same time, a preoccupied man, because since his arrival as bishop-elect of Mexico City in 1528 he had witnessed the brutality of the conquest. He preached against it, and had written often to the King of Spain, informing him of, and denouncing the cruelty and the unjust subjugation of the native peoples. This did not endear him to the subjugators, who targeted him for assassination.

The sign given to Juan Diego, intended for the Bishop of Mexico City and for us, is a tilma of roses that left a miraculous imprint of the Mystical Rose herself. The sign is readable within diverse cosmologies. This in itself tells us that the image aims to translate the Gospel mystery so that peoples *of every race and tongue* might understand what manner of love it announces, and so that all might be able to rejoice in it.

She appears in ways that indicate both virginity and expectant motherhood. She is clothed in the humble garb of the indigenous, yet with the sun surrounding her, and the moon at her feet. All of this, together with the stars on her mantle, convey to the indigenous peoples the cosmic significance of the appearing of the Mother of the True God at Tepeyac. The flowers on her dress speak of a paradise-like springtime in the cold of December.

And yet the image also announces purely, without diminution, the New Testament revelation. If you gaze at the image, you see that the expectant Virgin stands in a prayerful posture as the perpetual sign of the Gospel. She is expecting the birth of her child, the only-begotten Son of the Father. Like an icon, her presence envelops and shows the mystery. Indigenous peoples and Spaniards alike understood this. For the Good News, the content of the Gospel itself, as St. Thomas summarizes in his commentary on Romans, is the announcement of God's closeness to the human race, effected by his taking on our flesh, and consummated by our union with him in grace and then glory. (1) Through her consent, and in her womb is the indescribable nearness of the Word made flesh to the whole of the human race. This is what St Augustine calls *the marriage between God and man that took place in the womb of the Virgin.* (2)

The bishop had asked for a sign. He had the good sense to realize that the work of God in the Church does not emanate solely from the bishop's household. God can do marvelous things through his little ones. His job was to discern it. When he saw the image, he wept. And in what may be considered record speed for an episcopal action, by the end of December 1531, he had erected the hermitage the Virgin had requested, the little house, not far from the site of the current Basilica; and he had the image transferred there.

There is no doubt that from that time on Mass was offered at that place, most likely in an open-air space near the image. The native tribes were not accustomed and did not like to worship God in enclosed buildings. Thus, the mystery leads from the choosing of Juan Diego to the sending, to the sign given by the Virgin for the discernment of the bishop. The sign led and still leads to conversion to Christ, to baptism and participation in the Mass. The Mass is essential to the apparition because the union God has desired with us was initiated in the womb of Mary and reaches consummation for us in this life through the Eucharistic sacrifice. The act of worship effects in us a communion with the Christ, true man and true God, *who saves us by shedding no one's blood but his own.* (3)

The entire event of Guadalupe breathes a profound air of the *style of God.* This is a major aspect of its attractiveness and credibility, one of those convergent reasons that, as Newman says, when seen in relation to other convenient reasons, inclines the mind to faith. (4) Touched by the Spirit of the Scriptural Revelation we can recognize that the *way* the apparition occurs is deeply consonant with how God does things, deeply consonant with the truth that the preparation and announcement of the Gospel is most credibly done in the *style and rhythm* of the Gospel itself.

The tenderness of the encounters between Juan Diego and the Blessed Virgin stands out. *In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us.* Likewise, God chooses those *of no account in the world's eyes to shame the proud*, as St. Paul says. He offers consolation to the little ones; he sees the conditions of the afflicted; he invites and he sends. And whom God invites and sends, he first prepares. This is true most decisively in the Virgin Mother of God, it is also true, by consequence, in us. Further, the very condition of our vulnerability and defenselessness, calls down the mercy of God. This is the style of God, of the Savior, and it is deeply interwoven into the fabric of the events surrounding Guadalupe.

The converted heart is a merciful, compassionate and just heart. Our Lady of Guadalupe shows us this. This is why she can be, and in some ways **must** be, at the same time, patroness of Evangelization, defender of the unborn child, protectress of the immigrant; consolation of the mother weeping for her children in a blood-soaked land. She is also patroness of the elderly and

infirm. For neither Juan Diego nor the Mother of God could go about tracing the Gospel in this land while forgetting the sick and aging uncle in his sick-room. He is at the periphery of the story, yet very much at the heart of the event.

A final note: the Guadalupe event in the Americas occurred in the midst of a battle, largely waged by the mendicant orders, to humanize the European entry into a New World. The intuition here is that humanizing is coextensive with divinizing by grace. *Gaudium et Spes* articulates this point clearly. (5) The issue is ongoing conversion. Even peoples of long Christian history and formation can lose their Christianity when there is wealth and power to be had. This is as true today as it was in 1531. Nothing humanized the brutality of the conquest more effectively than the Guadalupe event and its evangelizing impulse. Our Lady made possible the successes of the Franciscans and of others in bringing Christ, and thus humaneness, into the history of their moment. As we enter a new world where dehumanization proposes itself in ever new ways, we must embrace the urgency of our own evangelizing efforts. We can do this, because we have with us the Woman clothed with the sun, and her child, sent *to take from us our stony hearts and give us hearts of flesh.* May we discern our moment well.

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Notes

(1) St Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistolam ad Romanos* (Cap 1, Lectio 1).

(2) St Augustine, *In Epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos* (Tractatus 1, 2).

(3) San Juan de Ávila, *Tratado del amor de Dios* (Cap 8): ha conquistado los corazones; no matando, sino muriendo; no derramando sangre ajena, sino la suya propria por todos en la cruz.

(4) St John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua: History of My Religious Opinions to the Year 1833.*

(5) *Gaudium et Spes* 41: Quicumque Christum sequitur, Hominem perfectum, et ipse magis homo fit.