



## **Solemn Reception and Mass of Installation Homily – Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe**

On a morning in early December 1531, at the Hill of Tepeyac, near Mexico City, Juan Diego, a local indigenous Indian, came across a young woman. Speaking to him in his native tongue, the woman asked that a church be built there in her honour. Even though Juan Diego was a recent convert to the Christian faith, he immediately recognised this young woman: it was the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Mary appeared to Juan Diego only a few times, culminating in the healing of his dying uncle and the appearance of her image on his peasant's cloak or 'tilma'. She identified herself as the Mother of the True God, and let Juan know of her compassionate presence among his own people, telling him: "Am I not here, I who am your Mother?" Yet, there is one crucial thing that Mary did not do at Tepeyac: she did not appear to the city authorities, nor the important dignitaries, nor even to the bishop! Instead, our Lady of Guadalupe, as she became known, visited a simple family man, from a local indigenous neighbourhood, living among his own people.

This event marks the true beginning of Christian evangelisation in the Americas: not as something imposed by a foreign culture, but as someone who could speak to people in their language, understand their culture, and thereby illumine their lives. Through Mary, Jesus first made his home among the indigenous people of Mexico, bringing to their local communities a reason for hope in their radically unfamiliar New World. At St Juan's canonisation, Pope St John Paul II declared: "Guadalupe and Juan Diego are a model of perfectly inculturated evangelisation."

Our Blessed Mother seems to have learnt this little evangelising strategy from God himself. After all, the visit from the angel Gabriel to her family home in Nazareth, where she was preparing for her marriage to Joseph, was a most remarkable moment. Beyond all expectations, a young girl, entirely insignificant by worldly standards, from an unremarkable town, ends up being central to the most pivotal event in human history. How unsurprising that Gabriel had to begin by reassuring Mary: Don't be afraid! Through his angel, God came to Mary in this great act of evangelisation. And it has been God's way ever since. Jesus still says: I am standing at your door, knocking; will you open the door and welcome me?

At its heart, 'evangelisation' is a big, complicated word for a small, simple thing. To evangelise is simply to tell someone something good. In our Christian context, evangelising is nothing more – or less – than me telling someone the story of the value and significance of my friendship with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Another word for it is

‘proclamation’. Hence, St Paul’s pithy definition: “we proclaim a crucified Christ” (1Cor1.23), foolishness to some and a scandal to others, but for us who believe in this Good News, the telling of it comes with the power and strength of God.

The elements that shape true evangelisation are equally uncomplicated: a simple message of mercy, forgiveness and trust, told to ordinary persons in search of faith, hope and love, in a way that fits in with their circumstances. Good evangelization is domestic, not institutional; it is family oriented. God was not acting on a whim when the Annunciation took place at the door of Mary’s home. The individual, the family, the local neighbourhood: these are the best settings for effectively proclaiming the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Families personalize our humanity, and evangelisation is always personal. The domestic Church – and the school of the family – is the original, and still the best place to learn about the gifts the Church has to offer to the world and to our culture. I am always someone in my family, even as the world will tend to treat me as a mere something. Within a family we are loved unconditionally for who we are rather than what we can do. So in a culture where mum, dad and the kids are under real pressure to conform to socially re-constructed arrangements, my hope is that you will join with me in sharing with our neighbours the reason for the hope we have in protecting and nurturing marriage and family life.

The incarnation of Christ – God becoming one of us – will always find its deepest roots in the local situation. Jesus lived at a particular time, he walked on specific lands, he encountered actual people, he died and rose at a precise moment in history. Our incarnate God likes to do things personally. This is why parish life is such a vital and essential dimension to every diocese. A parish is a family of families, giving shape and flesh to the presence of Christ in a local place. That’s why a bishop’s shepherding ministry only makes sense when there are local faith pastures where God’s people are in need of nourishment and care.

We colloquially refer to our parishes as ‘congregations’. I do it myself often enough. But really, this is a rather uninspiring name for such a noble thing. So, may I suggest a different name? May I suggest that our faith communities are really local ‘neighbourhoods of grace.’ We may have 26 parishes in our Diocese, but we actually have some 43 or so local neighbourhoods of grace, places where God’s people gather as a family of families. Here is where the streams of grace are constantly flowing: streams of Word and Sacrament, streams of teaching and learning; streams of mercy and healing; streams of faith, hope and love. For sure, our parishes can be a bit messy, unplanned and even frustrating at times, but they are alive with God’s Holy Spirit. They are our home.

Our beloved Pope Francis has a great way of describing these neighbourhoods: “The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers.” (EG.28) And just to make the point more pointed, he adds: “This presumes that a parish really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people.” Three cheers for Pope Francis, I say!

Each of us has a unique and essential place in the life of our Diocese. One of the really great transformations in the life of the Church in recent decades has been the remarkable growth in the discipleship of the laity. You are truly springs of faith, tributaries flowing into the great river of God's grace. Thanks be to God for this marvelous and timely gift to the Church in her journey through this third Christian millennium! Of course, a tributary can generate a bit of turbulence in an otherwise wide-flowing river. But a little turbulence can be a good thing, helping us to avoid becoming isolated and stagnant in our own little billabongs.

That's why we all have a role to play in building up our missionary capacities. Being mission-oriented is not something that requires grand plans or directives from above. Becoming missionary best happens locally, among fellow disciples, who have a heart to go out to others with a message of Christian hope. The great thing about becoming missionary is that it actually doesn't matter if I have been assigned some particular ministry in the Church; Jesus didn't first work out who was going to do what before he sent out his disciples to proclaim the Good News. It's a bit hard getting out to the peripheries of our society and culture with the healing gift of Christ if we're stuck trying to work out who gets to do what.

What will help us become mission-oriented is if we arm ourselves with simple strategies of Christian prayer and formation, a bit of energy for the Gospel, and that basic virtue of joy. (The days of the sourpuss Christian are over!) Learning our Christian faith; sharing the life of Jesus; supporting one another in our joys and hopes, our griefs and sorrows. That's what a disciple of Christ looks like. It's all about the mission, folks.

As we all become familiar with this missionary calling, may I also offer an encouraging word for those other great tributaries of grace constantly flowing into our river of faith: the priesthood and consecrated life. Our priests and deacons, our religious and consecrated women and men are like the great channels of the Church, through which God pumps his life-giving waters. That is why, in these shameful and humbling times for the Church in Australia, where some priests, religious, and Church leaders have failed you terribly, especially our young ones, it is all the more urgent that our faithful priests, deacons, and consecrated women and men know of our common task to encourage, support, safe-guard, admonish, serve, and above all love one another.

To my new brother priests who have been working faithfully in the vineyard of the Lord here in Broken Bay, may I thank you for your deep faith, great hope and compassionate love in serving the Lord and his people. I have much to learn from you, my co-workers, and I look forward to growing together in trust and mutual good will. Our Diocesan family needs our priests; our local neighbourhoods of grace need their pastors. It is only with both priest and people that a parish family can blossom.

As your Bishop I am responsible for providing you with faithful priests. I have heard it said that all the Church needs is an adequate number of priests to provide the sacramental basics, and others can do the rest. I'm not one of those voices. As with married couples and consecrated women and men, priests are a gift from God for the good of his Church. So, I say: the more the merrier! Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a priest *for* every neighbourhood of grace, and a priest *from* every neighbourhood of grace?

Therefore, I want to say to all of you, but especially to the young men of our Diocese: the vocational doors are open for business! If you are – or know of – a young man keen on his faith, a good human being happy in his own skin, and ready to give the priesthood a go, then I want to hear from you. Of course, there are only two ways of getting vocations: be one or breed one. So, there are tasks in this for everyone – you are co-responsible with me in this adventure. In a unique way, I think the women of our Church have a powerful role to play as vocational ‘match-makers’ because God has given you a gift of nurturing our young ones towards their calling in life.

As a young Diocese, it is you young people who are our particularly refreshing streams of grace. We need your vitality, hope and energy flowing into our Diocesan river to replenish us. It is you young people who will courageously take up the challenge, now and into the future, to respond generously to Christ in whatever your call will be. So, open your doors to Jesus, who is already knocking on your heart, hoping for your response. Get married and have lots of kids if that is your calling. Or become a priest or a religious. Whatever you choose, choose it with God. Trust him; he will not let you down.

Let me conclude where I began, on the hill of Tepeyac with our Lady of Guadalupe talking to Juan Diego. In that local neighbourhood of indigenous Indians, Mary spoke their language and revealed herself in their culture. Many decades after her apparition the locals explained the meaning of her image on the Tilma. What they saw reveals just how incarnational God will always be. Around Mary’s waist was a belt positioned in such a way that the local people – and only them – recognised that she was pregnant. Christ was coming to be born in that local community of faith that day in 1531. In the same way Christ is now coming among us, God’s beloved people of the Diocese of Broken Bay.

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