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Pope Francis wheels by mass attendees in traditional attire

Pope Francis arrives in a wheelchair to preside at Mass marking the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 12, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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During this "bitter time" of war, hunger, injustice and poverty, Our Lady of Guadalupe invites everyone to open their lives to her son, Jesus, and to learn to love others like he does, Pope Francis said.

"The Lord, through the Virgin Mother, continues to give us his son, who calls us to fraternity, to set aside selfishness, indifference and enmity, inviting us to get involved with each other 'without delay,' to go out to meet our brothers and sisters who have been forgotten and discarded by our consumerist and indifferent societies," he said.

Today, just like five centuries ago when Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to St. Juan Diego, she "came to accompany the American people on this hard road of poverty,

exploitation, socioeconomic and cultural colonialism," the pope said in his homily during a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica Dec. 12, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

"She is in the midst of the caravans that walk northward in search of freedom and well-being. She is in the midst of the American people, whose identity is threatened by a savage and exploitative paganism, wounded by the active preaching of a practical and pragmatic atheism," the pope said, in handwritten remarks that were not part of his previously prepared text.

Because of his difficulty with walking, Francis did not take part in the procession into the basilica and was seated to the right of the altar.

Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, was the main celebrant at the altar. After he incensed the altar, he made his way to a replica of St. Juan Diego's tilma, which bears the image of Mary, who appeared to the Indigenous saint in 1531.

In his homily, the pope reflected on the Gospel reading from St. Luke, which recalled Mary going "in haste" to visit her cousin Elizabeth after the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive the Son of God through the Holy Spirit, and that Elizabeth was also with child.

"In Jesus, born of Mary, the eternal one becomes forever and irreversibly 'God-with-us,' and walks beside us as brother and companion," the pope said in his homily.

"Our God guides human history at every moment; nothing remains outside his power, which is tenderness and providential love," he said, and "he never stops watching over our world -- needy and wounded -- eager to assist it with his compassion and mercy."

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God sent Mary as messenger "nearly five centuries ago, at a complicated and difficult time for the inhabitants of the new world," Francis said.

"Our Lady of Guadalupe came to the blessed lands of America, presenting herself as the 'mother of the true God for whom we live' to console and attend to the needs of the little ones, without excluding anyone, to embrace them as a caring mother with

her presence, love and consolation," he said. "She is our 'mestiza' mother," that is, a mother of mixed race."

This year, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe is being celebrated "at a difficult time for humanity. It is a bitter time, filled with the rumbling of war, growing injustice, famine, poverty and suffering and hunger," he said.

And yet, God shows his divine love and tells "us that this, too, is a propitious time of salvation," he said.

Our Lady "wants to meet us, too, as she one day met Juan Diego on the Hill of Tepeyac," Mexico, and "she begs us to allow her to be our mother, to open our lives to her son Jesus and to welcome his message so as to learn to love like him," the pope said.

Francis urged all faithful "of the pilgrim church in the Americas" to take part in the preparations for the celebration of the Fifth Centennial of the Guadalupian Apparition in 2031, which begins with the Guadalupian Intercontinental Novena Dec. 12, 2022.

"This celebratory journey," he said, "aims to promote an encounter with God through Our Lady of Guadalupe, for the renewal of the social and ecclesial fabric of these peoples and communities."

However, the pope expressed his concern about "proposals with an ideological-cultural bent of various kinds that want to appropriate the people's encounter with their mother, who want to dismiss and disguise the mother. Please, let us not allow the message to be distilled" or filtered into something "worldly and ideological."