

The Theology of Guadalupe

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 13, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

There were no empty seats at Mass yesterday at St. Bernard of Clairvaux Church, and many people stood along the walls. The church was bedecked with the national flags of all the countries of the Americas hanging from the rafters. Hanging from the flags were balloons. To the right of the altar, the tilma of Our Lady of Guadalupe stood atop a series of risers, of the kind a choir would stand on, only each riser was covered with bouquets of flowers. In the parking lot, there were dozens upon dozens of pickup trucks and family-sized SUVs, all of which had either a Mexican flag, or a medallion of the Virgin, or a Peruvian flag.

The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe has become the most celebrated day in the Catholic liturgical year in the Catholic Church in the United States. Perhaps there are more people who go to Mass on Christmas or Easter, but there is nothing like the fervor I witnessed yesterday. Our Lady of Guadalupe is now in fact, as well as in title, the Queen of the Americas. Somewhere in a cold graveyard in New England, our Pilgrim and Puritan forefathers are spinning in their graves. John Winthrop's "City on a Hill" last night witnessed fireworks to commemorate the apparition (Winthrop would have said the demonic, false, superstitious belief in the apparition) of the Blessed Mother to the peasant Juan Diego on a hillside in Mexico City.

Back when I was a seminarian, some of the more adventurous inmates took a dim view of the devotion exhibited by some of the more traditional brethren to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the mid-80s, some viewed devotion to the Blessed Mother as a quaint leftover from earlier, less theologically sophisticated times, as an impediment to the cause of ecumenical relations and, finally, as an instance of patriarchy. If only Mary had earned an M. Div., if only she was less passive ("Let it be done to me?"), if only she was a bit more 20th century.

I confess that there were times when I sympathized with those who were suspicious of those who were so devoted to Mary. I confess now that I was wrong. Not even complexly wrong. Simply wrong.

Mary is the great bulwark against the manipulation of the faith. If the study of history teaches anything, it is that the human capacity to turn otherwise fine, even noble ideas to ignoble and dangerous ends is almost limitless. For example, the American Founding is the source of many fine ideas, but when you hear Glenn Beck distort the ideas of the Founders to fire up his acolytes and confirm his and their prejudices, you know that fine ideas can be manipulated in such a way as to cause great harm. Ideas are at once the most durable, intractable, self-insistent things in the universe and the most ill-used, easiest things to distort, unable to defend themselves (in the short term) from those who seek to use them to achieve other and evil ends.

Theology is faith seeking understanding, *fides quaerens intellectum*. Human understanding is normally a means of exercising control: We seek to understand the physical universe to manipulate it toward human ends. We seek to understand our society through means of the social sciences in order to inform decision making about how to organize our society. Knowledge should invite humility, and for more than two millennia intellectuals have paid lip service to Socrates' statement, "I only know that I know nothing." In practice, of course, the reality is closer to Auntie Mame: "Mr. Babcock! Knowledge is power!?"

In the relationship with God, of course, we are powerless not powerful, and so we must be wary of the power that knowledge affords. Read these words of Hans Urs von Balthasar: "Whenever the relationship between nature and grace is severed [he might have written this as "whenever the Immaculate Conception is denied"]?.then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of "knowledge," and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are overpowered and finally suffocated by science, technology and cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation ? a world in which power and the profit margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated ? a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique." If there is a more trenchant critique of modern, Western culture, I surely do not know it.

The Virgin Mary did not give birth to an idea. She was not delivered of a Summa. She gave birth to a child. The facticity of the Christian faith, our conviction that our faith is not rooted in a set of ideas but in a set of facts that played themselves out in Galilee and Jerusalem two thousand years ago, our understanding that we are obligated, as were the waiters at Cana, to "do whatever He tells you," all this is defended, finally, unconquerably, from every assault of doubt or theological manipulation by the image of the pregnant Virgin. There was a time when the savior of the world was a clot of blood in her womb. Our theology is not Play-Do in our hands and we cannot just do with it whatever we want. Our theology must always remain true to brute fact of the Virgin's labor pains.

Yesterday, our pastor gave a typically fine sermon, but I quibbled with one phrase. He said that on Gaudete Sunday, we are filled with joy because we know that the baby Jesus is bringing our redemption. But, Jesus does not bring redemption the way we bring a bottle of wine to a party. Jesus is our redemption. His entrance into the world shows us the way to the Father. And His entrance into the world came via the Virgin's womb. Some theological savants may snicker at the fireworks, the processions, the flowers in front of the tilma. But, those poor folk at St. Bernard of Clairvaux church understood perfectly: We go to Jesus through Mary because Jesus first came to us through Mary. That may not fit with certain modern theological suppositions but, one hundred years hence, the theologians who snicker will be dead and no one will be reading their books, but the poor will still gather ever December 12 to sing hymns of praise to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Viva Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe! Viva!

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