

“You are the one I have chosen...”

Homily for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe 2014 for the Diocese of Yakima
Zechariah 2:14-17; Revelation 11:19a, 12:1-6a, 10ab; Luke 1:26-38

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

"My little son, there are many I could send. But you are the one I have chosen." These are the recorded words given to St. Juan Diego by the Blessed Virgin Mary during her second apparition at Tepayac Hill in 1531.

But allow me to back up. You all recall the first apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego. Speaking to him in his native Nahuatl, she told him she wanted a Church built upon Tepayac Hill where she would, in her words, offer her people "...love, compassion and protection...." She sent him to the bishop but the bishop's assistants were a bit skeptical. The bishop said he would consider the request and invited him to return.

So when San Juan Diego returned to the place of the apparition, he asked her to send someone else. He seemed to feel unworthy to persuade someone as important as a bishop. Thus the response of Our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego: "My little son, there are many I could send. But you are the one I have chosen."

Do you believe those words? Do you believe those words of Our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego? Do you believe those words of Our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego about YOU?

You – the people of this Catholic Diocese of Yakima in Central Washington – you are God's chosen ones. You have a nobility and a greatness that comes – not from a passport, a visa, a green card, or an I-9 work permit – but from being created and fashioned from the very image and likeness of God.

Certainly, I am keenly aware that you receive the very opposite message from various sectors of our North American society. This comes from the fact – and I will not mince words – that we have become a nation built on half-truths. We fail to tell truth that without undocumented immigrant labor we would have very little food on our nation's table. We fail to tell the truth about the human cost this takes on our nation's agricultural workers: the fear of deportation and the constant threat of family separation.

Here in Washington State, agriculture is the

single largest sector of our economy. It's larger than our state's higher profile industries such as computer software, aircraft and designer coffees. But it's built on a shadow economy of immigrant labor. In some form or other it's been like this in Central Washington for decades.

And if those who work our fields face fear of deportation and family separation, it's also important to note that courageous growers and packers also take on unique and contradictory risks in making sure we have food on our tables. There are many aspects to their challenges but allow me to cite just one:

If employers inspect the I-9 permit to work, they can be sued for racial profiling. If employer fails to inspect the I-9, rivals can disrupt their competitors by calling in a complaint and triggering a raid. This is why I have concluded the much of the economic underpinnings for Washington State economy is built on fraud – a fraud that begins – not with our growers or our agricultural workers – but with the very structure of our immigration laws.

I realize to some ears this critique sounds "political." It is not. This critique is moral. Dare we ask ourselves what this social reality does to all of us morally? Note well: the division between documented and undocumented is not simply an external division in our workplace and among our families. It's a division that runs inside each one of us – whether we are in the Anglophone community or the Spanish-speaking community – because all of us become compromised morally by living in a world built on fraudulent documents and fake identities.

In a broader context, this dark side of our consumer culture suggests that "identity" is something chosen and acquired. Our young people grow up in a world where "identity" is equated with "gay" and "straight" and where sexuality is a consumer "preference" rather than an expression of our humanity. The marketing world suggests that we gain "identity" through designer labels and fashionable clothing. The

world of sports and entertainment suggests a type of “identity” that is out there in the studio or on the field waiting for our imitation.

But our faith informs us of a richer and deeper identity: Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Through Christ we become most ourselves. By losing ourselves in the message of Christ we find ourselves. Indeed, it was the British rock singer Bono from U-2 who noted in an interview with Rolling Stone magazine a number of years back that it was “artistically appropriate” that Jesus Christ was born amidst the “straw poverty” of an animal stable.

That “straw poverty” might be the interpretive key for us as we deepen our devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Scholars suggest that this image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is one that shows three months of pregnancy. It’s as though Our Lady of Guadalupe is speaking into our legal shadows and our consumer complicity reminding us that “identity” is not something purchased or acquired. It’s something that’s revealed – given to men and women of every age by a good and gracious God.

What ties that unborn Christ Child with all children and all people – born and unborn – is that human dignity needs no documents and ministry in this Church demands no papers.

“My little son, there are many I could send. But you are the one I have chosen.” Those words are meant for each and every one of you – documented and undocumented. God has chosen YOU to bear his mission of “...love, compassion and protection...”

Friends, many of you know me. I was born in Moses Lake – the first parish in the Diocese of Yakima to hold a celebration in honor of our Lady of Guadalupe – the year I was born! My grandfather was a union organizer. My mother attended St. Joseph Academy in Yakima as well as St. Paul Cathedral School. My parents were married at St. Paul Cathedral. While I heard German spoken by my grandparents, I cannot recall a time in my life when Spanish was not heard during the harvest and in the fields. When I returned to become bishop in the Cathedral where I was baptized I immediately sensed I’d not only be among extended family and friends but I’d also need to become a missionary to the Spanish speaking in order to serve in the diocese where I

was born.

The same is true for each and every one of you too. Regardless of your earthly citizenship, your native language or your country of origin you have a mission – a mission given from the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe through San Juan Diego to each and every one of us: to bear his mission of “...love, compassion and protection...” You may not feel worthy. You may feel that your English is bad or – in my case – that my Spanish is bad. But God has chosen you for this saving mission of grace. Following the command of Our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego, this Advent season whom will you touch today with an act of kindness? A gesture of forgiveness? A message of mercy?

“My little son, there are many I could send. But you are the one I have chosen.” All of us should take great heart and great courage in those words of our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego.

Why? Because salvation does not come from politicians. It comes from Christ. To cite St. Paul, “Our citizenship is in heaven.” “Our citizenship is in heaven” regardless of our legal status here on earth.

This is why I am so grateful for the many celebrations in honor of our Lady of Guadalupe as well as their fruit in our celebration of Christmas. When we full engage in these public acts of worship, we create a space where we live the truth of our human dignity. In our public worship, we acknowledge and give thanks to the giver of our true identity – Jesus Christ.

Our religious devotion means that we do not allow the failed political debates to dominate our lives – publicly or privately. When we live this truth – the truth of our human dignity – we refuse to be divided between those who are eligible for an executive order and those who are not. It means we refuse to cave to social intimidation and fear of deportation. When we live the truth of our deepest human identity that comes – uniquely from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – then maybe one day our civil leaders will catch up and imitate in just legislation the human dignity and the transcendent citizenship we all possess right now.

May we trust the words given to San Juan Diego by Our Lady of Guadalupe as words given to all of us: “My little son, there are many I could send. But you are the one I have chosen.”