**From the Amen Corner**

**December 10, 2017**

In about 1609 Spanish missionary fathers opened a mission in Southeastern Oklahoma. Now pause and think about that for a moment. More than 10 years before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock, there was a Catholic presence in what is now Oklahoma. This was 80 years before Isaac Newton published his work about the orbits of the planets, 90 years before he and Leibniz had invented calculus and just a little after Shakespeare had written *Henry IV.* The Catholic presence in Oklahoma is more than four centuries old.

And the fathers who came the Kiamichi Mountains were part of the later efforts to spread the Gospel in North America. Already the cornerstone to the Cathedral in Mexico City was laid in 1573, the Jesuit missions in Canada had started in 1603; even the church in the mission of Santiago, Atitlan in the remote Highlands of Guatemala was built in 1597. Coming to the woods in Southeastern Oklahoma was almost an afterthought.

(I have also heard it said there was a mission in Southwest Oklahoma, near what is now Lawton, but I don’t know anything about it. Supposedly it was founded by the Franciscans and it operated, of course, with the intent to evangelize the Plains Indians. Ultimately it was not successful, or at least not very successful, and the missionaries were drawn back south into Mexico. No one has discovered the ruins, if there are any to discover. Given what we know about the fierceness of the Plains Indians, it is not surprising to note their lack of success.)

We might also note that one of the first martyrs to the faith in our part of the country happened in what is now the Panhandle of Oklahoma. As Coronado was moving through this part of the country on his exploratory journey in 1540, one of the priests who accompanied him made a decision to become a true missionary. He endeavored to set himself apart from the expedition and join one of the groups of Native Americans they had come upon during their march through what is now Beaver County. His idea was to join the band, learn their language and bring them into the faith. Certainly he understood the hardship involved in accompanying these hearty hunter-gatherers and he no doubt understood the challenge of entering another language and another culture. Alas he did not understand the dangers involved. He separated himself from the group and joined his new mission field. Something happened; he was killed by the tribe the next day, still within proximity of Coronado. I have often joked that he ought to be noted as the patron saint of Pastoral Planning: things didn’t work out as first imagined! But think what might have happened if over the course of a hundred years there had been a thousand missionaries who had endeavored to do the same as he. If only a tithe of them had been successful; what they could have done! What the faith would have looked like! That this intrepid soul could dare to do such a thing is the most astounding part of the story. Of course, it failed, but the power to imagine such a desire and the inspiration to know it was tried, that’s the lesson. The mission of Christ to the world; they understood it.

The Spanish missionary efforts in the Americas, North and South, are part of the most successful evangelization in the history of Christianity. From the time of the conquest of Mexico City by Hernan Cortez in 1519 to the preaching of Sergio Mendez Arceo, the bishop of Cuernavaca in 1975, the effort to spread the gospel to the peoples of the Americas has been a lesson for the whole Church. We in the United States know almost nothing about its successes and we know nothing at all about its extent. The efforts of the missionaries as they confronted the challenges of the Native Peoples of North and South America and their success in bringing the message of Christ to them has long been buried in silence. But it was tremendous.

Anyone who has been the celebrations of the anniversary of Fr. Rother’s death in Guatemala can testify to the powerful impact of the faith in that place. Not just because they have a saint and martyr; the celebration itself is astounding, a combination of smells and movement and speech and singing that dwarfs anything we normally see here. I have never met a North American who hasn’t been moved to his socks by the power of the liturgy and depth of faith so evident there. Sometimes it even moves Guatemalans. Once I was helping Fr. McSherry during Holy Week in Cerro de Oro, one of the mission parishes from Santiago. We had the Easter Vigil mass along with about 40 baptisms. The electricity in the village had gone out just about the time mass started so everything was done by candle light (and by the light of a small fire built in the corner of the church to provide the live coals we used for the incense burner!). We could see the full moon rising over the lake as the service went on. As we came out of the church with the choir singing a song they had written to the tune of *The Saints Go Marching In,* a woman from Guatemala City, standing at the doorway, said: “Father, I thought I had lost my faith. I have found it again!” The only thing I could think to say to her was: “You’ve come to the right place.”

The depth to which the faith has penetrated, the power by which the faith is expressed, the beauty of their prayer and their passion, they transfigure the moments of worship, indeed, the very identity of the people. It is unforgettable to see and smell and hear. And it’s not just the way the people sing or the incense they use or their presence at mass; these are only the externals to the most notable element; it’s the unavoidable fact we notice first of all: they actually believe. The Eucharist is the center of life, the presence of Christ is real, the love of neighbor is central, the promise is life is greater than life; all of these truths are enacted in their lives. They have become embodied in the life of the community. It’s really something.

And I think one element in this astounding display of missionary seriousness is the feast we celebrate this week: Our Lady of Guadalupe. The encounter of Juan Diego with the message of Mary has become the lens through which we are able to see and understand the power of the gospel in North America. There is a direct line to draw between the gift of Mary’s message on Tepeyac Hill in Mexico and the walls of the mission foundation in Southeast Oklahoma. The second is a product of the gift of the first.

When Cortez completed the conquest of the Aztec nation in 1521 he had three major concerns. The first: domination; the second: exploitation; the third was: evangelization. These concerns didn’t play themselves out sequentially; they were all happening at the same time. The Spanish took over the Empire and established their presence among the Native Peoples, outnumbered 5,000 to 1. They had to set up the means by which they could govern what they had conquered. And they had to figure out how to make use of the resources of the land. This was not only the gold they had encountered in Mexico, although they were excited to know how much of it there was and how important it became to the economy of Spain, but it was also the land and its produce necessary to sustain them and the people. And they had to begin to share the faith with their people.

It is important for us to remember: the Spanish who came to the New World had endured a 700 year long process of re-conquering Spain from the Muslims who had occupied it in the 7th Century. In the same year Columbus discovered America, the last stronghold of Muslim presence in Andalusia was eliminated. For 7 centuries Spanish Catholicism had been focused on this re-conquest. They understood the heroes of the faith in the image of the warrior and the progress of belief as the product of battle; this was their experience. Living their religion was possible only when they had, literally, vanquished its enemies. When they got to Mexico and conquered the peoples there, they imagined their work as carrying on the fruits of military presence. They brought the faith they knew, and the means by which they understood it, with them to the Americas and they began their work.

The problems they encountered were huge; which accounts for them being only marginally successful. There was first of all the language. It takes a long time to begin to cross the barrier of another mode of expression. Simply writing dictionaries and understanding how the grammar works is but the beginning. Entering into the language, coming to inhabit the world of the speaker, these are the challengs. And not only the world of language and expression, but also the religious world, the cosmology and theology of the culture by which the people understand themselves and the work of God among them; these are enormous obstacles to cross as the gospel is being proclaimed. The missionaries made a few converts as they struggled in the opening decades of their presence of the faith in North America.

And then, Guadalupe happened. Juan Diego, one amidst the first generations of these converts, received a message from a woman who identified herself as ‘the Mother of God.’ He was supposed to follow her instructions and tell the bishop there to ‘build the church here.’ The message itself was as simple as the apparition story. As it played out, it became the intricate foundation on which the mission of Christ was built. Because Juan Diego saw and heard more than mere communication; he saw and heard and smelled a whole different world. And the message of the young woman was the gateway into this world.

Let me explain. According to the story, when Juan Diego was walking into Mexico City, he became aware of the songs of birds; these songs were strange to him because it was December and these birds should have already migrated. When he came upon the young woman, she spoke to him of her identity and her message in his own, native language. And when the bishop asked Juan Diego for a sign, and Juan Diego passed this request off to the apparition, the sign was given in blooming roses, notable for their color and their smell. When this sign was delivered, Juan Diego’s robe was imprinted with an image of the young woman who had directed his mission to the bishop. The medium quickly became the message. The message had been: build the church here. And by it, the bishop and Juan Diego had imagined a chapel on that spot. As the story unfolded from chapter to chapter, it became clear: the medium of color, language, smell, beauty, image and song were all part of the church to be constructed. It was not a message about architecture; it was a message about a whole new world. The mission to bring Christ to the peoples of North America became the mission to construct a world in which Christ was present to them everywhere. That’s the message of Guadalupe; it is how the message of Christ began to weave itself into the life of the peoples of North America, and into the missionary genius so obvious to us now.

This message was fabulously successful. Today we imagine evangelization to be something much more flat and less interesting. It seems to revolve around words and the convictions of clever messages and convincing witness stories. The story of Guadalupe seems remote to us.

And we grow frustrated. Partly because the words we use disappear in to the great sea of words filling our world these days. No matter how distinctive or how cutting edge our language is, it often evaporates when placed next to the energy and quantity of communication everywhere in our world. Communicating Jesus can become about as purposeful and as meaningful as communicating a brand of soap or a type of insurance. And this evangelization seems to be the work of the cognoscenti. It’s either those who are clerics, those who have access to TV and studios or those who have a genius for how to make their faces stand out on the Internet. The average person doesn’t seem to have a place at all.

But there is more to proclaiming Christ than making sure we have the right words. Words are important, of course, and we strive to make sure can say and communicate in the best way possible. But we tend to forget there are other modes of making Christ present to those who do not yet know Him. Or as Fr. Gallatin always said: We know how to tell the truth but we don’t know how to dance the truth. Because of that, we reach a limit in our ability to communicate the presence and the message of Christ to the rest of the world. When we learn some of what these first missionaries to North America learned, we will be more able to duplicate their success.

If you want to see what I mean, come to the celebrations planned for Our Lady of Guadalupe this coming Tuesday. Of course there will be mass and preaching; the liturgy is ‘the source of summit’ of our faith; we would never not celebrate the most important aspect of our encounter with Christ. But there will be more. We gather early in the morning for our ‘mañanitas’; a morning serenade to Our Lady. It is a chance for all of us who gather to do what those who want to express their affection do: sing. Following that we offer everyone traditional hospitality by serving sweet bread and tamales. Encountering Christ, hearing his message and confirming out lives to the message of God, as Mary did, always involve the gift of hospitality and food.

But that’s not all. At both the mañanitas as well as mass, we will having the gift of dancing and music provided by our ‘matachines.’ They have been practicing all year for this day. A ‘matachin’ is an old Spanish word that means ‘mummer’ or ‘entertainer,’ ie, a dancer. But they aren’t just entertaining us with their moves and their rhythms; they are offering their efforts and their commitment (and their time) as a sacrifice to God. The gift of tradition and dance, the gift of time and movement, the offering of commitment and energy, these are what life is made of. To offer your life to God is something vastly more than thinking right thoughts or saying the right words; it is to understand your life using a different framework. These dancers understand. This is what the missionaries accomplished in the life of those whom they touched; they brought them a different world, not just an additional option for how to get along in life.

That’s the challenge facing us in our day and time. Just recently it has become very popular to invite believers to withdraw from the world, to adopt ‘the Benedict Option’ (following the example of St. Benedict of Nursia who founded the Benedictine monastic order) and build a fence around the life of belief and trust in Christ. But no matter how troubling the politics of our everyday might be or how difficult the attitudes are of those who surround us, it is not sufficient for us to write off our society and withdraw into ourselves. We are challenged to bring a new world to our world here. The people around us may have grown tired of the gospel and hostile to its prospects but we shouldn’t be discouraged by their anger. We should be committed to offering them the whole new world we have in Jesus. We should begin to think about how we might learn from the missionary examples so powerfully a part of our own history.

These elements of evangelization include some of the things we ‘Anglos’ don’t normally think of. They include beauty, movement and song. I am not proposing we abandon bible study and our witnessing or our CCO process by which we learn and reinforce the foundation of our faith and encounter with Christ. Clearly these are central to our life in Jesus. But in addition to these efforts, we should remember that innumerable lost sheep have found a shepherd by the power of touching music and beautiful song. Augustine said, ‘he who sings, prays twice.’ He might also have said, ‘he who sings, preaches twice.’ We should be sure our music and our singing and all that brings light and joy to our hearts are part of what we offer the world in Christ.

Two other evangelical gifts are much forgotten in our world today as well. They are: organization and community. I mean, we have ways of organizing ourselves and being together that help us to open our lives and our hearts to God’s presence. We should pay attention to how we are together so that we reinforce the gift of Christ among us, not just at mass but in all of the ways we can be together with one another. When the missionaries went to Santiago, Atitlan in 1523 they put in place the organization of the parish into guilds and groups that have existed now for nearly 500 years. Each has a place in the life of the parish and amidst their lives in Christ. We should know: what we expect of one another and how we live with one another can e our surest gateway into seeing and knowing Jesus. Such a powerful evangelical tool shouldn’t be left to rust or blunt.

When Juan Diego made his way to the bishop’s house on the morning of Dec 12, 1531 he had no idea the revolution he was about to unleash. The message encapsulated in the image the rest of the world would see, called ‘Our Lady of Guadalupe’ would begin to shake up the continents of North and South America until it infiltrated even across the borders of what became the United States. Nothing has been the same since that day. But, perhaps he did understand. After all, he had been baptized into Christ already; he had given himself to the work of the Holy Spirit. He was waiting to see what the Lord in His goodness would bring. Changing the world was, of course, his ‘job’ as a believer. I suppose he might not have been surprised at all to know: he did.

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