

NOTE: The following is the homily given by the Most Rev. James F. Checchio, JCD, MBA, Bishop of Metuchen, at a Dec. 12 Evening Prayer for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and official launch of the “Year of Awakening.”

My brothers and sisters, this gathering tonight of our local Church of Metuchen is an expression of your belief in Mary’s words to us which she spoke to Juan Diego when she appeared as Our Lady of Guadalupe: “Am I your mother not here. Are you not under my shadow and protection? Are you not in the folds of my arms? What more do you need?” Yes, your presence here is indeed a sign of strength and faith. It is a sign, that already God is moving amongst us, His people of the Church of Metuchen, and that fills me with such joy.

Many of you are here because of your great love for Mary or because you perhaps you were encouraged to come. Maybe you were invited here by your pastor – maybe you are representing a particular school or ministry within our diocese – but it is not by chance that you are here. Regardless of why you came, your presence here is indication for a great expectation of what God wants to do in our diocese, and He will do!

This launching of a Year of Spiritual Renewal and Awakening of Faith is a new, historic moment for our diocese. In my travels around our diocese during these past two years, I have been blessed to see so many good, faith-filled people. I am humbled by so many good and generous lay people in every parish I visit throughout our four counties. I meet so many good priests, deacons and religious, and yet, we need more – we all deep down *want more*. It is this desire for more that we all share – the stirrings of God’s grace – “I am with you.”

This new moment of spiritual renewal – much like the holy season of Advent – is meant to stir up within us “holy longings.” I recognize that longing for more in the eyes of our young people, who need more than the superficial solutions that the world offers. We hear about increased depression, anxiety and even more suicides amongst our young, as the world moves them further and further from placing all their hope in a God who loves us and is always with us.

I see the need for more in hearts of families who struggle to find time to be together. We are technologically rich but left personally poor in an over busy hectic lifestyle. People wander off in a world that promotes instantaneous satisfaction rather than fidelity.

I see a desire for more among our priests and religious, who work so hard in their parishes, schools and apostolates, but do not always see the fruits of their labor. We can be tempted to lose

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confidence and trust, with fewer people saying yes to Sunday Mass, fewer people willing to say yes to Catholic education and religious education programs. We may worry in silence – where is the faith? Am I failing in the mission the Lord has entrusted to me? The world is so suddenly different – am I up for the challenge of today? Our good priests and religious are in need of more strength and encouragement.

I see a desire for more in our seminarians, who against all odds, heard the Lord calling to them, quietly yet persistently – come and see where I live, be with me – I will make you fishers of men. They generously respond to our loving Father’s call in their longing for more. I see in the faces of folks in nursing homes, prisons and shelters, a yearning for a word of hope and encouragement – reminders that they are not forgotten, that God sees, and God is responding to them. They have *holy longings* to be known and loved.

All these *holy longings* are really placed within us by God. He will not rest until we rest in Him. We cannot truly rest until we finally discover the longing of our heart, which is a living relationship with Jesus Christ. Christ came to bring us life and life to the full (Jn 10:10). God has placed within us the capacity for greatness. It is through His grace that He takes the likes of you and me and transforms us. With His grace we can become holy. The reason why we have holy longings is because there is One who is looking for us, who stirs up within us holy restlessness. This is the movement of grace that we seek to tap into during these next months of spiritual preparation for our consecration to Jesus through Mary.

And we are turning to Our Lady precisely because she knows and understands the restlessness of the human heart more than anyone. She is God’s perfect creation, who not only knew her longing for God, but placed her whole life at the service of the God who loved her. It was with sweet surrender that she gave over her body to conceive the living Christ within her. She gave the world Christ for the first time and she never took her “yes” back. She is the Mother of the Church because she said yes to those graces that God poured out on Pentecost.

It has always been the instinct of the Church to turn to Mary in order to find Jesus, to know Jesus, to love Jesus. In the early Church, we have the oldest, still visible images of our Lady

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which were painted in love as the faithful gathered together in prayer, hiding in the catacombs, imploring Mary’s help. Down through ages, even to us right now, we faithful instinctively have turned to her. So, throughout this year, we too will follow more completely her instruction to “Do whatever He tells you.”

We do not set out on a new program. We do not set out to try to implement a strategy. Rather, we are setting out to give God permission – permission to change us, to transform our hearts, to put new enthusiasm into our hearts, to *set our hearts on fire!* We are looking for a New Pentecost – a time when new graces will come from the hand of God to make all things new. If the hearts of all our people are newly touched by God during this year of awakening and renewal, our parishes will have new energy. We will be people on fire with the love of God, living as His faithful disciples, right here, in 2019 throughout the 90 parishes of our beautiful counties of Middlesex, Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren.

This year we are setting out to ultimately consecrate our diocese to Jesus through Our Lady of Guadalupe. We will begin with a yearlong preparation, where we will intentionally seek to be more available to God, to pray more fervently for the graces of conversion of heart and for a deeper friendship with Christ. Tonight, I encourage you to begin in earnest to turn to God daily in prayer and end your day – each day – in prayer that is real, sincere prayer of the heart. Nothing will happen without a dedication to prayer, precisely because prayer admits that we do not have the answers, that in humility we depend on God for everything.

During this year will have opportunities to learn more about prayer – and my brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to pray together. The blessings Mary experienced in life were the result of her courageous and constant dedication to God and her firm resolve to overcome temptation. Hence Mary is our model and intercessor. Sincere prayer will naturally lead to repentance. Let the sacrament of penance, frequent confession, become part of your spiritual journey. I encourage priests to be even more generous in making themselves available for this great sacrament of God’s mercy. May our renewed hearts find concrete expression in increased works of charity and mercy.

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The many prayerful events and gatherings that will take place this next year are meant to be sign posts along the way to dispose us more fully to make a personal, new commitment to God through the powerful intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Why Our Lady of Guadalupe? In 1531, Our Lady appeared in our western hemisphere, when much of what would become the United States was part of new Spain – Texas and California were part of Mexico. She appeared on a hill outside Mexico City, to a layman, now, St. Juan Diego. Her message was simple – build a house, a church, where my Son may be honored. She left an indelible sign that is still with us today – this image that we have here tonight, one you will see much of in these coming months, the image Our Lady left on the Tilma or cloak of St. Juan Diego. This image has inspired countless people for over 500 years, to turn with expectant hearts to the Virgin's Son, Jesus Christ. In the 10 years following her appearance to Juan Diego, over 9 million native people accepted Christ. It was a miracle. Pope St. John Paul II named Our Lady of Guadalupe as Patroness of the Americas, for he saw that her divine intervention and intercession would be needed again and again on these shores of the new world.

So tonight, my brothers and sisters in Christ, let us take Mary into our homes and make her part of our family and welcome her motherly care and love. She says to us what she said to Juan Diego many years ago, *"Do not let your heart be disturbed. Do not fear.... Am I, your Mother, not here. Are you not under my shadow and protection? Are you not in the folds of my arms? What more do you need?"* Indeed, she will teach us and guide us. She will comfort us and challenge us. She will unite and heal us. She will. She desires it. We just have to ask her. She is here, with us.

Dear Mary, we pray tonight, and every day that you would set our hearts on fire for Jesus and His Kingdom.

Viva Cristo Rey!

Viva Maria immaculado!