

Tomorrow at noon, thousands of area Catholics will be processing in Stockton. With 33-or-so floats, dancers, musicians, and a number of horses, they will trace a huge circle from downtown St. Mary's Church, ending in the same area to celebrate bilingual Mass beneath the Cross-town Freeway.

Why? Because they're grateful that Mary came to the New World in 1531 to bless Mexico with a message of hope, mercy, and harmony. More than that: she carried Christ in her womb. So, in this great season in which we prepare for the coming of Jesus in Bethlehem, those who love Our Lady of Guadalupe express a special debt of gratitude for her presence in our lives.

It was to a humble Indian of 57 years that the beautiful young lady first made herself known on December 9th, 1531. Cortez had conquered the legendary city of Tenochtitlan just ten years earlier. Although he delivered the natives of Mexico from demonic forces and brutal sacrifices, and liberated the subjected tribes from the militarized Aztec empire, Cortez ultimately failed to offer the Indians a better life. However, one blessing that came with him was Christianity. The Franciscans did what they could to evangelize the natives, seeking also to defend their dignity in the face of the Spaniards' insatiable thirst for gold, for slaves, and for more territories.

When Mary left her miraculous image imprinted – rather, painted – on the coarse fiber “tilma” of Juan Diego, she unleashed a wave of conversions which would number nine million within a decade. Her gentle words, her caring presence, and her detailed image communicated volumes to the people whose history had prepared them well for the coming of the Savior.

Our Lady of Guadalupe continues to touch lives and bring down blessings from heaven in a modern world which seeks to deny the activity of God.

Because we love her, and because we need her continued intercession, we join together joyfully by the thousands. Tomorrow, in Stockton, you who attend will be moved by the variety of color, of sound, and of movements dedicated to the praise of the God she came to announce. For this reason, I want to invite all of you to join our celebration. It will last 'til around 4:00.

“Oh, but I'm a Christian.” “So are we.” “But I worship God alone.” “So do we – but since Mary has been so intimately associated with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we honor her in a special way.” “But why?” Because our love for Jesus spills over to love of his Mother. We know he is honored and blessed when we remember her.”

“But why make this public display?” “Because she deserves our best. We see parades happening everywhere, and not always for the best of motives. Why not dedicate one to celebrating the heritage of faith we’ve received?”

Yes. Why not. In fact, I should warn you politely that a number of events involving Mary are coming up. We begin nine days of preparation for the Feast of Guadalupe on December 3rd, and celebrate the final day December 12th. That Wednesday, “Mañanitas” are sung from 5:00am, followed by a day full of worship, theatrical productions, and food. It’s true that we take a break at mid-day to gear up for the evening ceremonies. But the entire day is dedicated to this wonderful event which changed the history of the world.

Saturday, December 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, is also a national celebration. Our country was dedicated to her from the beginning.

And who can celebrate Christmas without appreciating the essential role of Mary in the history of our salvation? As a child, I only heard of Mary at Christmastime, but that was enough to attract me to her year-round. I can see God’s hand at work in this. At seven, I searched throughout an entire store in Seattle to find the perfect birthday gift for my mother. At long last, I discovered a delicate porcelain container. To this day, my mother still has that ceramic treasure. It features a small statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, with a light-blue mantle and a big pink rose directly in front of her womb.

So, as I prepare to celebrate my twelfth anniversary of ordination on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, I risk getting some letters of protest by reminding you, dear readers, of this most beautiful and blessed of women. She was there for her Son Jesus, and she’s certainly been there for us.

In fact, many non-Catholics know this, even though they wouldn’t admit it publicly. They sense, in their hearts, that the Mother of God is still very much alive and well, and that even as she kept vigil over the Christ-child as he lay there asleep, so she keeps watch over us, her children in Christ.

Recently, I was talking with a friend who has some difficulty with this concept. At that moment, the song “Mary, did you know?” came on the radio. I turned it up. This simple primer of basic Christology asks Mary if she was aware of the great mystery of salvation that lay hidden in her baby. So I teased my friend, “Who is the person that sings this song talking to?” “Why, Mary, of course.” “But how can she talk to Mary, if Mary cannot be talked to?” Silence. My dear friends in Christ, don’t let another year go by without showing Jesus the basic respect of getting to know his mother.