SUGGESTIONS FOR HOMILISTS:  
FEAST DAY OF  
OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

“I want to encourage you and your communities to continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks today, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrows and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home.”

—Pope Benedict XVI, Celebration of Vespers and Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America, April 2008

Immigrants who come to the United States, and particularly those who are undocumented, are a vulnerable population who need someone to speak on behalf of their human rights and dignity. Our moral tradition calls on all people of faith and goodwill to stand up in defense of life and human dignity; it is a fundamental calling for us as Catholics. Scripture speaks repeatedly of the migration experience, from Abraham who was sent out from his homeland in the Old Testament, to the Holy Family who fled Herod and lived their lives for a time as refugees in a foreign land. When the scriptural or liturgical texts address migration and themes related to it, whether on a special occasions or on regular Sundays, the homily can be an effective moment for prophetic instruction and encouragement. The Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe is an opportune time to reflect on the reality of migration in the modern world, particularly as it pertains to migrants from the Western Hemisphere including Mexico and Latin America. Her Feast Day is tied closely to that of Saint Juan Diego, which falls three days earlier. Reflecting on each of their stories can provide a springboard to highlight important issues related to migration. How we as Catholics ought to respond to migrant communities in our midst, no matter their legal status, has to be informed by our Faith tradition.

December 12: The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

On December 12 Catholics celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Also referred to as the “Patroness of the Americas,” this feast provides us with an opportunity to focus on our shared Catholic identity, regardless of our national origins. Highlighting this shared identity will hopefully motivate Catholics to become more attuned to the suffering of their fellow Catholics. In their pastoral letter Strangers No Longer (SNL) the Catholic bishops of the United States and Mexico noted that “under the light of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the littlest of her children, who were as powerless as most migrants are today, our continent’s past and present receive new meaning. It was St. Juan Diego whom
our Mother asked to build a temple so in it she could show her love, compassion, aid, and defense to all her children, especially the least among them. Since then, in her Basilica and beyond its walls, she has brought all the peoples of America to celebrate at the table of the Lord, where all his children may partake of and enjoy the unity of the continent in the diversity of its peoples, languages, and cultures” (SNL, #20).

While she signifies the interconnected character and unity of the Americas, Our Lady of Guadalupe holds a special place in the lives of many Catholics living in Mexico. Reflecting on the connection between Mexican Catholicism and Our Lady, Bishop Eusebio Elizondo of Seattle, Washington noted once that “the faith of the Mexican people is alive and much rooted in Jesus Christ, but it is so through the love and devotion to his Mother, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the great evangelizer of the Americas. Because of the role of Guadalupe in the faith of the Mexican people, that experience impels them to seek peace and reconciliation” (http://www.usccb.org/about/leadership/holy-see/benedict-xvi/bishop-eusebio-elizondo-2011-papal-visit-cuba-mexico.cfm).

Their connection to Our Lady is also due to the role that Saint Juan Diego, whose feast day falls three days earlier on December 9, plays in the story of Our Lady. After seeing apparitions of the Virgin of Guadalupe in 1531, the widower Juan Diego told local Bishop Juan de Zumarraga of Mary’s visitations and her desire to have a church built where she appeared to him. In response to the bishop’s request that he ask Our Lady for a sign, Juan Diego went back to Tepeyac on a December day and implored the Virgin Mary to provide something to convince the bishop of her wishes. The Virgin instructed him to gather owers from the hillside, and even though roses in December are rare, he was able to ll his cloak with them. When St. Juan Diego returned to the bishop and opened his cloak, the fresh roses fell to the ground and miraculously revealed an imprint of Our Lady’s image. A church was built on the site, and Juan Diego lived out his days nearby, helping others, praying, and doing penance.

On July 31, 2002, thousands of people joined Blessed John Paul II as he canonized Juan Diego, the First indigenous American saint, in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe near Mexico City. The basilica is named for the apparition of the Blessed Mother that St. Juan Diego witnessed on the hill of in the sixteenth century. At his canonization, Blessed John Paul II called the new saint “a simple, humble Indian” who accepted Christianity without giving up his identity as an Indian (St. Juan Diego’s Canonization Mass, July 31, 2002).

The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe provides native born Catholics with the opportunity to reach out to their Mexican brothers and sisters living in the United States and reconnect with them in a sense of solidarity. While borders might separate our various peoples from one another, Our Lady of Gaudalupe, Patroness of the Americas, provides us with a bond that extends beyond any historically contingent divisions.

Scripture, The Church’s Moral Tradition, And the Teaching of the Bishops

Catholic concern for migrants and refugees has a strong foundation in Scripture. The Old and New Testaments poignantly depict Moses and the Jewish people in exile and the Holy Family as an archetype for refugees everywhere. The obstacles to a hearty welcome (fear of the stranger, prejudice, competition, sense of loss) also find counterparts in the parables of Jesus and in His capacity to break through the taboos and restrictions of his contemporaries, especially in regard to tax collectors, sinners, Samaritans, and Gentiles. These scriptural teachings
call us to a deeper compassion for the plight of the migrant. Inspired by this calling of our faith, the Church has developed a rich body of teaching and a heritage of concern for immigrants, migrants, and refugees. Our Biblical tradition reminds us that in welcoming the stranger we are welcoming Christ (Mt 25:35). Catholics are thus called to work for the conversion of hearts and minds and, in doing so, to create a culture and practice of hospitality in communities receiving newly arriving migrants.

The Catholic faithful in the United States—a land so blessed and whose tradition is steeped in the migrant experience—have special responsibility to be a welcoming people. In the pastoral letter, Strangers no Longer: A Journey of Hope, the bishops remind us that Church must provide for the religious and spiritual needs of newly arriving immigrants and refugees and ensure that the sacraments and the full life of the Church are made available to people living in these communities, regardless of their legal status. Second, the Church must help to provide for the material needs of immigrants and their communities. For this reason, the bishops call on local parishes and other Catholic institutions to develop a network of social services for migrants and their families as they transition to their new life in America and, where possible, to provide affordable or free legal services to assist in the often arduous immigration process, particularly for those who are caught up in detention.