

Homily for the Feast of Our Lady of La Leche
The Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche, St. Augustine
By Bishop Felipe J. Estevez
October 11, 2019

Today, we give thanks to the missionary activity of the church that the Spanish and mostly Franciscan missionaries of the 1500's brought to St. Augustine from Madrid; the devotion that they had received from Bethlehem, a devotion that touched the first generation of Christians in La Florida; the memory of the founding Mass of the City of St. Augustine, the veneration of the Cross, and the little church of Our Lady of La Leche, which is today being excavated on our grounds guided by Doctors Kathleen Deegan and Timothy Johnson. The excavation includes the altar, the Great Cross, and Our Lady of La Leche Shrine which is called the "sacred acre" of our country, even by President John F. Kennedy a few weeks before his death in Dallas, Texas. If Mary has a message for us tonight, I find it in her words that appear in the Gospel of St. John, "Do what he tells you." Keep the words of Jesus, keep the entire Gospel in your heart and do it, make it alive in your own lives.

It is such a joy to celebrate the local feast of the Mother of the Lord, Nuestra Señora de La Leche, with members of the recently reenacted Confraternity, with benefactors of the Shrine, the Knights and Dames of Malta, the personnel of the Shrine, on a day in which The Holy See authorized to be celebrated in all parishes, missions and institutions of the Diocese of St. Augustine.

In the Magnificat, Mary invites us to sing, to praise God in his doing, to experience how great is our God who is worthy of our joyful recognition. Mary says, "For God who is mighty has done great things for me, holy is His name." She recognizes the living God who closes the door to the mighty of this world and raises up the little ones, the poor in spirit, who are blessed by the Lord. She praises God in his great mercy toward those who obey Him and open their hearts to Him.

Mary, the humble virgin of Nazareth, sings as she bears the divine child in her womb, and Elizabeth is the first to declare to her, "Blessed art thou among women." The greatest gift of Mary is her faith, contrary to the first Eve. Mary, the new Eve, listens to the Word and submits with total trust in the Lord who knows better: "Let it be done according to your Word." Mary of Nazareth's faith is in perfect continuity with the faith of father Abraham, who also was challenged by a mysterious God asking him to go forth and form a people for His glory. Both Abraham and Sarah said "yes," and they left from Ur, even while Sarah was reluctant and dismayed.

When we look at the image of Our Lady of La Leche, we contemplate a mother and her child, a child being nursed, being fed, as she gazes at Him with an enduring, tender love, a gaze sublime to the extreme. On this Sunday, October 13, 2019, Pope Francis will declare a saint Cardinal John Henry Newman, the great British theologian who emphasized the role of the laity in the

Church, the great witness of listening to the right conscience, following the truth, and searching for the truth which lead him to recognize the Body of Christ in the Roman Catholic Church: “In the beginning woman was formed out of a man by almighty power, so now by a light mystery, but in reverse order, the new Adam was fashioned from the woman. He had been foretold the immaculate seed of the woman, deriving his manhood from the substance of the Virgin Mary as it is expressed in the Articles of the Creed ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary’.”

“He, the Son of Mary, and she, the Mother of God, thus He came selecting and setting apart for Himself the elements of body and soul, then uniting them to Himself from the first origins of existence, pervading them, following them by His own divinity; spiritualizing them and filling them with light and purity, the while they continued to be human and for a time mortal and exposed to infirmity.” (Taken from the *Parochial Plain Sermon*, #16, 13.)

The fascinating beauty of this devotion is that it illustrates the teachings of St. John: “the Word was made flesh and lived among us.” The eternal Word of the Father took to the amazement of the angels our human nature from Mary’s flesh; He, the Son of Mary, and she, the Mother of God.

This amazing plan of God was conceived in the womb of a virgin, grew within her in time and was born in Bethlehem of Judea under the protection of St. Joseph. This is a most relevant story for us here in 21st Century America, for if the Almighty God chose to descend to the astonishment of angels and the pale jealousy of Lucifer as a child, how much more are we to protect human life endowed by such dignity and value? The bond of mother and child is inseparable, so tied together, that when the life of the child calls for the total protection of his or her mother, the beautiful sacred image of Our Lady of La Leche states loudly to all, “Do not separate what for in God is one.”