

OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.

~ Revelation 12:17

DECEMBER 12 is the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of the Americas. The Virgin of Guadalupe has been loved and honored for over four hundred fifty years by countless people throughout the world, particularly by the Mexican faithful. The miraculous events of 1531 culminated in the conversion of an entire culture that had been enslaved to idolatry and massive human sacrifice.

Before the coming of the Spanish conquistador Cortéz, the Aztecs were under the dominion of Montezuma, a harsh tyrant and deeply superstitious king. In addition to exacting enormous taxes from those living in the outlying tribes of his empire, like his predecessors Montezuma demanded a bloody tribute of human victims to be sacrificed to the gods on the steps of the great stone temples. As many as twenty thousand victims would be brutally sacrificed when a new temple was erected.

With the Spanish conquistadors came Spanish missionaries who intended to bring the saving Gospel to the Aztecs. But the roots of the pagan Aztec culture were deep and their task of evangelizing them was difficult. The cruelty and rapacity of some Spaniards, those interested solely in gold and slaves, was not much improvement on the misery inflicted by the Aztecs. The first bishop in the New World, Bishop Juan Zumárraga, begged the intercession of the Virgin Mary. He secretly asked God for Castilian roses, then unknown in Mexico, as a sign that his prayer had been heard.

On December 9, 1531, Juan Diego, a recent Indian convert to the Church, was on his way to the city for Mass. As he climbed the hill called Tepeyac, he heard a gentle voice calling to him. He soon came face to face with a lady of overpowering beauty, who lovingly revealed her identity and gave him an important task:

“Know for sure, my dearest, littlest, and youngest son, that I am the perfect and ever Virgin Holy Mary, Mother of the God of truth through Whom everything lives, the Lord of all things near us, the

“Am I not here, I, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Do you need anything more?”



Our Lady of Guadalupe, by Timothy Schmalz

Lord of Heaven and earth. I want very much to have a little house built here for me, in which I will show him, I will exalt him and make him manifest. I will give him to the people in all my personal love, in my compassion, in my help, in my protection: because I am truly your merciful Mother, yours and all the people who live united in this land and of all the other people of different ancestries, my lovers, who love me, those who seek me, those who trust in me. Here I will hear their weeping, their complaints and heal all their sorrows, hardships and sufferings.”

Mary instructed Juan Diego to tell the bishop her desire to have a church built on Tepeyac. Juan Diego walked the long miles to Mexico City, joyfully reflecting on the words of this Heavenly visitor. In the presence of the bishop, he described his vision of Mary and delivered her unusual request. He implored the bishop to grant her request, but the bishop expressed his doubt about Juan Diego's vision. Following a second vision, Juan Diego approached the bishop a second time. Again the bishop listened to all that Juan had to say, but he sent him away, telling him to ask the lady for a sign, so that he might believe the story and grant her request. Returning to Tepeyac, Juan related to the lady the response of the bishop and she tenderly smiled and asked that he return the next morning, for a sign would be provided.

On December 12, Juan awoke to find that his beloved uncle was dying. He needed a priest to give

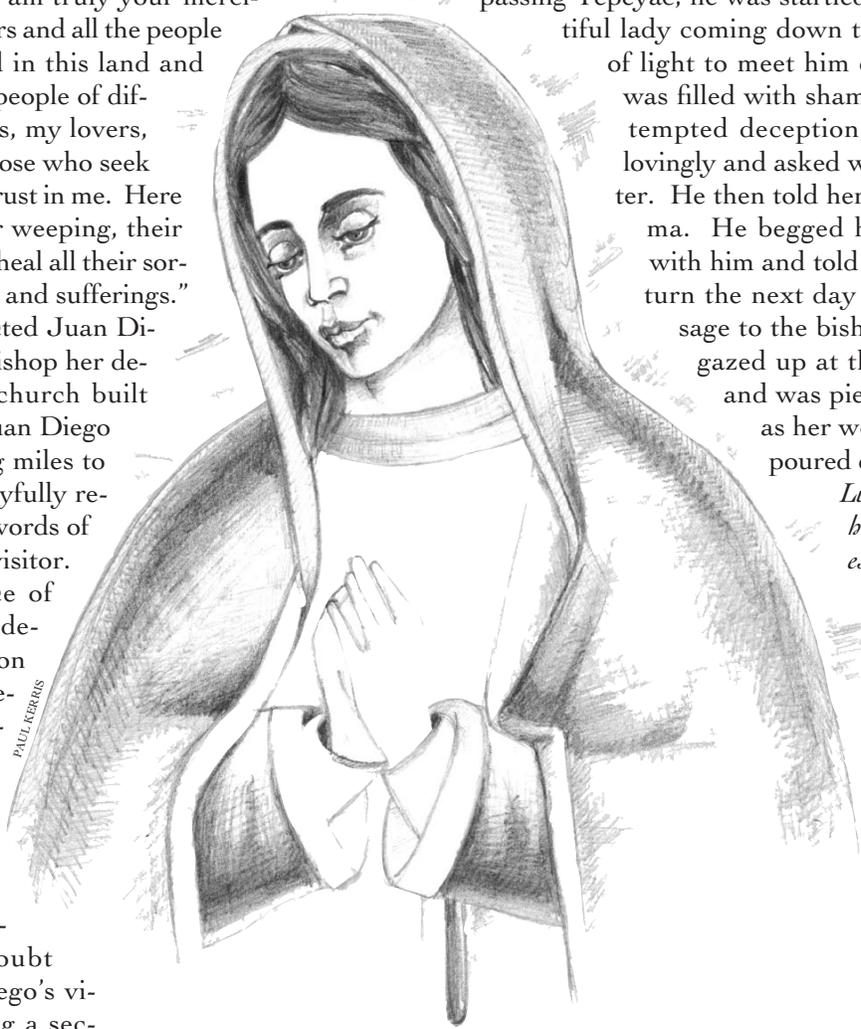
him the sacraments of the dying. Juan Diego felt that surely the lady would understand if he hurried to the city to bring a priest instead of meeting her as he had promised, so he took a path around the other side of Tepeyac so she wouldn't see him. As he was passing Tepeyac, he was startled to see the beautiful lady coming down the hill in a blaze of light to meet him on the path. He was filled with shame at his small attempted deception, but she smiled lovingly and asked what was the matter. He then told her about his dilemma. He begged her to be patient with him and told her he would return the next day to take her message to the bishop. Juan Diego gazed up at the beautiful lady and was pierced to the heart as her words of sympathy poured down upon him:

Listen, put it into your heart, my youngest and dearest son, that the thing that disturbs you, the thing that afflicts you, is nothing. Do not let your countenance, your heart be disturbed. Do not fear this sickness of your uncle or any other sickness, nor anything that is sharp or hurtful. Am I not

here, I, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing

of my arms? Do you need anything more? Let nothing else worry you, disturb you. Do not let your uncle's illness worry you, because he will not die now. You may be certain that he is already well.

After hearing the lady's words, Juan Diego put his trust in her and realized that he still had a task to complete. She directed him to climb to the top



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of Tepeyac hill and gather the roses he found there. Even though it was mid-December, he found beautiful roses blooming on the rocky slopes. He laid them one by one into the fold of his coarsely-woven tunic, known as a tilma, and climbed cautiously down to where the lady awaited him. She carefully arranged them in the tilma and then sent him off to give the bishop his sign.

Once again standing before Bishop Zumárraga, Juan Diego repeated the lady's request that a church be built, then let down his folded tilma. The Castilian roses fell to the floor, the sweet aroma of flowers filled the room, and the bishop fell to his knees. He knew the roses were the special sign that his prayers for the peaceful conversion of the Aztecs had been answered. But, in addition, Juan Diego's tilma had been miraculously transformed. In its very fabric was a perfect image of the lady Juan Diego had seen at Tepeyac, a glorious picture of the Mother of Christ. It was as if the Blessed Virgin were herself within the room. The bishop knew that the Virgin

peyac hill in Mexico City. Millions of pilgrims come to the shrine each year and stand before the sacred image, gazing with loving wonder upon its beauty and holiness. At least twelve popes have expressed love and veneration for the holy image and its tradition, and have hailed Our Lady of Guadalupe as the Queen and Mother of the Americas.

Scientific research has been done on the tilma, and certain details attest to its miraculous nature. For example, within one of Mary's eyes a small inverted image of a bishop kneeling can be seen when examining the image with a microscope. When the image was miraculously imprinted onto the fabric of the tilma, it was as if the image caught sight of what was in front of its eyes, namely the bishop of Mexico kneeling down before Juan Diego. The image in the eyes is upside down because it corresponds to how the human eye functions. (Every image that the eye receives is transmitted into the back of the eye upside down.) In 1531, no one knew this about the eye's physiology or would have been capable of painting it

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Mary had come to Mexico in a uniquely beautiful and personal way to lead the people to her divine Son, Jesus Christ. She had come to the New World to gather her frightened children under the mantle of her love and protection.

As news of this miracle spread, many people flocked to the bishop's residence to gaze in wonder upon the sacred image of Mary that had been imprinted on Juan Diego's tilma. A chapel was immediately built to house this miraculous image until a more beautiful Church could be constructed. Literally millions of Aztecs converted to Christ and were baptized as a result of Mary's apparition and miraculous sign. In less than a decade, virtually the entire Aztec nation of nine million people had been baptized and the practice of human sacrifice had ceased. Never before or since have so many been converted in such a short time.

The miraculous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe can still be seen today. The tilma is encased in glass above the main altar in the basilica located on Te-

microscopically small. In 1945, Pope Pius XII stated that the Virgin of Guadalupe had been painted “by brushes that were not of this world.” With a mother's tenderness, Our Lady continues to invite all those who dwell on the American continents to a life of holiness, prayer, and peace by following her divine Son, Jesus Christ.

St. Juan Diego was canonized in July 2002.
(CCC 67)

Note: Our Lady's words were spoken in Juan Diego's native language, Nahuatl, and were written down in that language between 1540 and 1545 by Don Antonio Valeriano, an Aztec nobleman and native speaker of Nahuatl who had become a Christian, a scholar and an administrator. (Juan Diego died in 1548.) The above translation was done by Janet Barber, I.H.M., from a Spanish translation of the Nahuatl original by Fr. Mario Rojas Sánchez. The quotations are taken from the book A Handbook on Guadalupe published by the Academy of the Immaculate, New Bedford, MA: Part Press, Inc., 1997.