

¡Viva Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe!

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The year is 1487. The Major Temple of Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Aztec empire, is being rededicated to the “gods” of Aztec paganism. According to the accounts of the Aztecs themselves, over 80,000 human beings were sacrificed to these demons masquerading as “gods.” It was said that the blood of those sacrificed ran like a river through the city, and the hearts, torn still-beating from the victims, were collected in giant bowls as offerings.

I relate this rather macabre story to underscore how much the deception of the Evil One had corrupted the people of Central America. Satan had so perverted their culture that they would offer their children as sacrifice, wage wars merely for sacrificial victims, and worship a pantheon of false gods and idols. Indeed, the Mexican and Mayan people worshipped a god known as Quetzalcoatl, the “Feathered Serpent.” They were so deceived that they actually worshipped the Devil in the form he had appeared to Adam and Eve!

Thus, the people of Mexico were suffering under an oppressive Aztec empire and an even more oppressive slavery to sin and death. They needed the pure

light of the Holy Gospel, and they had needed it for some time.

That light came when Don Hernán Cortés and his band of conquistadors landed on the shores of Mexico. In the span of two years, the armies of Catholic Spain, supported by native tribes, destroyed the cruel empire of the Aztecs. They shattered the idols and images of the false gods, and they tore down the cursed temple in Tenochtitlan. Near the site of that house of darkness, a Catholic church was built to shine as a light to all Central America with the Holy Gospel of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The missionaries who came with and after Cortés to the land of Mexico found converts among the natives. Of importance to our story was a man by the name of Cuauhtlatoatzin. He was a married native Mexican farmer, landowner, and mat-maker. His name means “Speaking Eagle,” and, being 47 years old at the coming of Cortés, he no doubt saw the brutal sacrifices and rites of the Aztec religion. In 1525, just a few years after the arrival of the Spanish, he and his wife converted and were baptized. He took the name “Juan Diego.”

Their faith was strong, and they would walk together from their village of Tolpetlac to the city Tlatelolco, part of what would later become Mexico City, in order to go to Holy Mass and perform daily errands. On their way they would cross the hill of Tepeyac. By 1531 however, St. Juan Diego would make this trip alone. His wife had fallen asleep in the Lord, and all he had left of his family was his uncle, Juan Bernardino. He had no children.

One Saturday just before dawn, St. Juan Diego was making his way to Tlatelolco in order to assist at Holy Mass. It was December 9th, 1531; the day when the Holy Catholic Church, East and West, celebrated the conception of the Mother of God in the womb of her mother, St. Anne.

When he reached the bottom of Tepeyac hill, he heard singing coming from the summit. It sounded to him like a chorus of beautiful singing birds. He looked up at the top of the hill and wondered whether he was in Heaven, so beautiful was what he was experiencing. Soon the singing stopped, and he heard a voice call out to him: “*My little Juan; Juan my little Diego.*” He drew near to the voice, and when he reached the summit of Tepeyac hill,

he saw a woman standing before him and beckoning him to come closer.

The Lady's traditional native clothing shone like the sun, and the cliff where she stood was as resplendent as a precious gem. Her sublime radiance affected all around her, as even the weeds seemed as beautiful as the most exquisite flowers. He bowed before her, and listened as she spoke to him in his native language of Nahuatl.

The Lady asked him: *"My little Juan, most humble of my sons, where are you going?"* St. Juan Diego responded that he was going to learn the Divine Faith. The Lady then revealed herself to him in these words:

"Know and understand well, you the most humble of my sons, that I am the Ever-Virgin Holy Mary, Mother of the True God for whom we live, of the Creator of all things, Lord of heaven and the earth. I wish that a temple be erected here quickly, so that therein I may exhibit and give all my love, compassion, help, and protection to you, and to all the inhabitants on this land and all the rest who love me, invoke and confide in me, because I am your merciful mother. I wish to listen there to their lamentations, and remedy all their miseries, afflictions and sorrows. And to accomplish what my clemency seeks, go to the palace of the bishop of Mexico, and you will say to him that I have made manifest my great desire, that here on this plain a temple be built to me. You will accurately relate all you have seen and admired, and what you have heard. Be assured that I will be most grateful and will reward you, for I will make you happy and worthy of recompense for the effort and fatigue in what you will obtain of what I have entrusted. Behold, you have heard my mandate, my humble son; go and put forth all your effort."

St. Juan Diego agreed to fulfill what the Mother of God had asked him, and he immediately went to Mexico City.

It did not take long for St. Juan Diego to arrive at the palace of the new bishop of Mexico. His name was Juan Zumarraga, and he was a Spanish-born Franciscan. After waiting quite a while to see the bishop, St. Juan Diego was admitted and, with the help of a Nahuatl translator, he told the bishop everything just as Our Lady had commanded him.

Bishop Zumarraga was understandably unconvinced. The hill of Tepeyac had been a place where the pagan Mexicans worshipped a corn goddess. How could he be sure that this Nahuatl-speaking Indian was not merely mixing the false religion of his ancestors with the orthodox Faith? The bishop told St. Juan Diego to go home and come back later.

Pure and child-like as he was, St. Juan Diego was crushed. As he was returning home to his village, he again passed Tepeyac hill. Once again Our Lady appeared to him in the same exact place as earlier that morning. When he saw her, he fell prostrate and told her everything that had occurred. He asked Our Lady to send someone else – someone of greater importance and renown; someone whom the bishop would respect and believe. Our Lady told her "little Juan" that, though she had many messengers to choose from, she had chosen him for this task. She assured him of his success, and urged him to return the next day and re-state her message.

On the next day, Sunday, St. Juan Diego made his way to Mexico City to assist at Holy Mass and visit the bishop for a second time. Once again he was admitted to the bishop's presence, and once again he related what Our Lady had told him. The bishop still would not believe him, and asked him to produce some sign to prove that it was truly the Mother of God who was speaking to him. St. Juan Diego eagerly agreed, much to the surprise of the bishop.

Returning to Tepeyac, St. Juan Diego told Our Lady of what had happened, and she gently assured him that she would indeed provide a miracle. She again asked that he come to Tepeyac hill the next day, to which he agreed. When he arrived back at his village, he learned that his beloved uncle was deathly ill with the plague (probably smallpox). His uncle beseeched him to leave early in the morning to get a priest from Tlatelolco so he might receive the last rites before he died. No doubt St. Juan Diego struggled with this change of plans, but he agreed nonetheless.

The next morning, December 12th, a Tuesday, St. Juan Diego made his way towards Tlatelolco. He was fearful however of meeting Our Lady again, and so he took a different path. As he was going around Tepeyac hill however, he saw Our Lady descend from the top of the hill and come down to meet him where he was. She asked where her son

was going, to which St. Juan Diego bowed down and explained his situation. He begged Our Lady to be patient with him, and that, after he had completed his uncle's request, he would return to Tepeyac hill. Once again Our Lady lavished her gentle compassion on her humble son. She assured him that his uncle would be cured and would not die. At that very moment, back at Tolpetlac, Juan Bernardino was miraculously cured of his illness.

Our Lady then shared with St. Juan Diego of the sign which she would give to the bishop. She told him that at the top of the hill, he would find rare Castilian roses, which he was to collect and bring to her. These roses were native to the region of Castile in Spain; the region that Bishop Zumarraga had come from. They should not have been in bloom in December, much less on Tepeyac in Mexico! And yet, St. Juan Diego found roses there of every color. He quickly gathered these and wrapped them in his tilma (a cloth apron made of cactus fiber). He returned to Our Lady with the roses and she herself arranged them in his tilma. She then sternly told him that he was to unfold his tilma and reveal the roses *only* to the bishop. He agreed to her request, and tied one end of his tilma to his neck; thus folding up the apron-like garment to carry the roses. He then began his journey to Mexico City, not realizing that this was the last time that St. Juan Diego would see the apparition of Our Lady.

When he arrived at the palace of the bishop, he was stopped by the servants. Seeing that he was carrying something in his tilma, they began to press him to reveal its contents. So as to protect the fragile roses from the rough handling of the servants, he uncovered them just a bit. The servants were amazed to see Castilian roses of many colors, and three times they forced their hands in to grab some of them. Yet each time they grasped at the roses, they felt as though they were merely painted on the cloth. They were so awe-struck by this that they informed the bishop, who immediately admitted St. Juan Diego into his presence.

St. Juan Diego, carefully clutching the folded tilma, recounted all that he had experienced since his last meeting with the bishop. He told him of Our Lady's sign to bring the roses, and with great joy he unfolded his tilma allowing a colorful cascade of roses to fall onto the floor.

Suddenly, the bishop and his aides fell on their

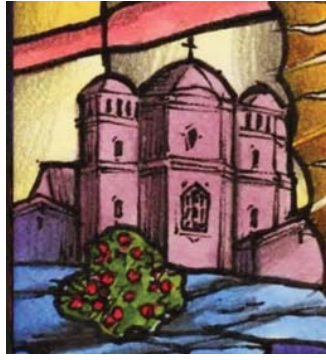
knees before St. Juan Diego. Tears streamed from their eyes and Bishop Zumarraga begged the Mother of God for her pardon at being so unbelieving. Imprinted there on the tilma was a holy icon of Our Lady just as she had appeared to St. Juan Diego!



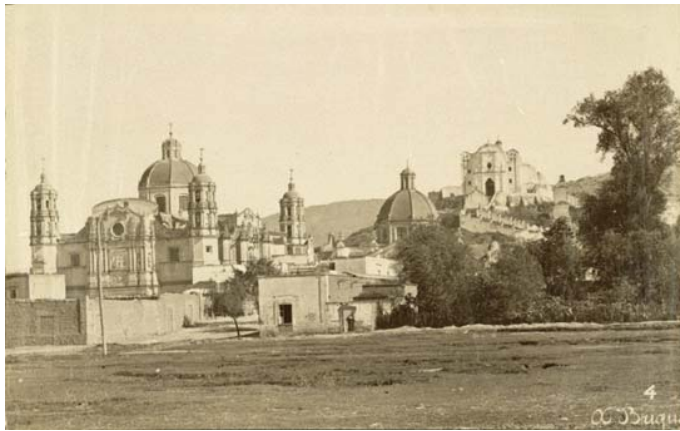
With great care the bishop removed the miraculous image from St. Juan Diego's neck, and brought it into his chapel before the Presence of Our Lord in His Blessed Sacrament. Many of the bishop's aides and servants approached the holy icon and kissed the edge of the tilma in veneration of the miraculous image.

The next day, December 13th, Bishop Zumarraga and his retinue accompanied St. Juan Diego to the place where Our Lady had commanded a temple to be built in her honor. The bishop then accompanied our saint to his home in Tolpetlac to see his uncle. Just as Our Lady had said, Juan Bernardino was free of any illness. Furthermore, he recounted that Our Lady had appeared to him as she had to St. Juan Diego on Tepeyac. Our Lady told Juan Bernardino that she was to be known as "The Blessed Image, the Ever-Virgin Holy Mary of Guadalupe." Upon hearing this, the bishop was stunned. In Spain there was another image of Our Lady in a place called "Guadalupe." Moreover, the name "Guadalupe" sounds very close to a Nahuatl word, "Cuatlashupe," which means: "She who crushes the serpent." Indubitably, this was a reference to the barbaric Aztec paganism which had worshipped and carved stone idols of serpent "gods." By taking this name, Our Lady was showing her superiority, and that of her Son, over all false gods and idols of the Aztec myths.

The bishop soon began construction on a chapel at the summit of Tepeyac hill. The day after Christmas, the holy icon was transferred with great jubilation to the new chapel. Bishop Zumarraga made St. Juan Diego the sacristan of the chapel, and he spent the rest of his life telling people of what he had seen and heard. In 1548, St. Juan Diego fell asleep in the Lord, as did Bishop Zumarraga, only days apart from each other.



Within ten years after Our Lady's apparition over eight million Mexicans were baptized into the Holy Faith. This explosion of conversion and devotion continued to spread throughout Mexico in the years to come. The Mexican people saw in this brown-skinned and tender image the reality of the Living God who loved them and did not ask for their flesh and blood. Instead, this good God gave *them* the Flesh and Blood of His Son in the Holy Eucharist.



In 1709, a massive basilica was dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe on Tepeyac hill. Where once stood a false shrine to a demon goddess now stood a majestic and holy temple to the Living God, and therein was kept the still preserved icon of Our Lady.



In 1972, the ground under the basilica was found to be sinking, and so a new basilica was built next to the old one. There remains the icon, still miraculously preserved after almost 500 years. Approximately 15 million people visit the basilica each year; the same number of the Mexican population when Our Lady first appeared to St. Juan Diego.

The miraculous nature of this holy icon continues to baffle skeptics and is confirmed by scientific analysis. Firstly, the tilma material is over 475 years old and remains in fine condition...a fact which defies all explanation, as tilma naturally degrades over a few decades. Furthermore, the earth-based pigments which make up the original image are just as rich in color, while other embellishments made through the centuries by iconographers are fading with the passage of time. Moreover, the tilma shows no traces whatsoever of preliminary stretching and preparation, as would be necessary even for the most skilled painter or iconographer. Even more amazing are the arrangement of stars on the mantle covering Our Lady: they form the constellation which would have been seen in the night sky of December 12th, 1531.

A final secret is revealed when the eyes of Our Lady are magnified with modern tools. Within her eyes appear images of what appear to be human figures. Though the identity of these individuals is still under debate, one eye seems to show St. Juan Diego with his revealed tilma standing before a kneeling Bishop Zumarraga. Were this icon made by human hands, it would be virtually impossible for a 16th century iconographer to put such small details into the image. The fact that they were only discovered recently supports this conclusion.

The Memorial of Our Lady of Guadalupe is celebrated on December 12th, the anniversary of the miraculous revealing of the icon. St. Juan Diego was canonized by Pope St. John Paul the Great in 2002, and his memorial is on December 9th; the day he first encountered the apparition of Our Lady at Tepeyac. Our Lady of Guadalupe is considered patroness of Mexico and the Americas as a whole.

Ultimately, this holy icon gives witness to the enduring power of the Gospel, and the Blessed Virgin Mary's role in proclaiming it through her mysterious apparitions. Furthermore, as Americans, Our Lady of Guadalupe is our pride and our source of boasting Christ Jesus. Out of His great love for this "New World," He sent His Mother to visit us almost 500 years ago at the little hill of Tepeyac. For this, we give thanks to the Living God, who blessed this great land with such a beautiful and glorious apparition of His Mother and ours.