

Guadalupe devotion fortified poor for centuries

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not an Aztec noble — to whom the Blessed Virgin Mary reportedly appeared in the winter of 1531, telling him in his native language that she was the "Mother of the True God, who is the Author of Life, Creator of all things and the Lord of heaven and earth who is everywhere." (From the 1956 book *The Dark Virgin*, a documentary anthology by Donald Demarest and Coley Taylor.)

She had appeared to Juan Diego on a hill called Tepeyac, where a temple to the Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzin, the snake-woman, had once stood. Before it was destroyed by invading Spaniards, the temple had been the venue for the sacrificing of women to the goddess who — along with the Aztec civilization — had fallen from her high place following Spain's conquest 10 years before.

The Spanish conquest ended the dominance of the powerful Aztecs over the scores of subjugated tribes from whom the Aztecs exacted tribute. However, although the Spaniards had liberated many suppressed peoples, they did not turn out to be the benign rulers that their first victories had seemed to promise.

"In their conquest of the New World, the Spaniards destroyed the temples of the Indians, killed many of the young men, and often violated the women," stated an 1977 article on the Guadalupe apparitions, printed in the *Denver Catholic Register*.

"At the time of the four apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe ... memories of the conquest — the massacres, the destruction of the temples, were still very much alive in the minds of the Indians."

But the Blessed Virgin reportedly appeared not as a conquering Christian Spaniard, but as an Indian, and millions converted to belief in her Son after her reported appearance.

All of the area's tribes learned of her Indian complexion when they saw that Diego's *tilma*, or cloak, had been imprinted with her image. This happened when she asked Diego to gather up roses growing in the dead of winter as a sign to the local bishop that she truly was the Mother of God.

In fact, numerous observers have pointed out the image itself is nothing



AP/Wide World Photos
A demonstrator carries a photograph of the *tilma* during a Jan. 9 protest in Mexico City. Several hundred activists walked more than 600 miles from the states of Veracruz and Tabasco to protest ongoing electoral fraud.

less than a brilliant pictograph, at once gently dethroning the old Indian god-worship and enthroning veneration of the Lady and worship of the Son she claimed to have borne.

According to information provided by the U.S. Catholic Conference's Hispanic Affairs Office through the Office of Chicano Affairs in Denver, Colo., Our Lady of Guadalupe's image is coded with numerous symbols whose meaning would only have been apparent to the Indians steeped in the Aztec Empire's religious beliefs.

Her eyes are looking down, for example, revealing that she is not a god herself, for if she was, she would have looked straight ahead. Her face shows compassion, and her hands are poised in a manner of offering — indicating that something is to come from her.

Indeed, she told Diego: "I am a merciful Mother to thee and to thy fellow people on this earth who love me and trust me and invoke my help. I listen to all their lamentations and solace all their sorrows and suffering." (*The Grace of Guadalupe*, by Frances P. Keyes.)

The maternity band around her waist indicated she was about to give birth, a sign that someone was yet to come to the Indians. The stars on her mantle indicated a new era in the Indians' lives, and the fact that the sun's rays shine from behind her shows that she is greater than the sun.

Omecihuatl was considered the supreme god in the Indians' religion, a mother-father figure whose color was turquoise — the predominant color in the mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The woman also stands on the moon, indicating she is greater than the moon-god, god of night.

Such rich symbolism in one image did more to convince the Indians to convert to the Spaniards' religion than a thousand catechetical lessons could have achieved, according to Sister So-

corro Betancourt, OLC, pastoral assistant for the Hispanic community at Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

"They can see in the picture everything to convince them that she came from heaven," noted Sister Socorro, a native of Mexico who is organizing the Dec. 12 celebration.

Today, Diego's famed *tilma* hangs in the Guadalupe basilica near Mexico City. The image has served as a unifying symbol for the Mexican people through the centuries since it was first displayed in an adobe hut at the bottom of Tepeyac.

Numerous miracles have been attributed to the intervention of the Lady portrayed on the *tilma*, and revolutions and insurrections have been mounted under banners of her image.

"The patriot Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla started the Revolution for Mexican Independence at his church in Dolores, Guanajuato, with the cry 'Viva La Virgen de Guadalupe y muera el mal gobierno — Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe and down with the bad government,'" (*Mexican Folkways*, by Frances Toor.)

The *tilma* itself seems to be a miracle of sorts, according to several observers.

"The central figure seems to be mysteriously indestructible," wrote Vicente Diaz in a 1985 article for *Columbia* magazine. "It survived 116 years in the salt water humidity of the original, virtually open-air chapel built at the foot of a hill ... surrounded by a salt lake."

Ultraviolet light from hundreds of thousands of candles should have faded the image over the years, Diaz continued, but, quoting Phillip S. Callahan, a biophysicist and University of Florida professor, "the original portrait is as fresh and crisp as the day it was formed, showing no cracks or fading."

Indeed, the fact that the *tilma* flawlessly combines oil, tempera, watercolor and fresco paints on a single sur-

face — with no drawing of the image apparently beneath the paints — seems to settle any arguments about its supernatural origins, according to experts, since such an artistic execution is humanly impossible.

But concentrating on the *tilma*'s miraculous qualities obscures its fundamental meaning, according to Father Cadena.

"I think the message is beyond the miraculous," he said. "Everytime that we have had oppression, she is the center of the fight ... for the people."

Our Lady of Guadalupe is more than a sensation sent by heaven — she symbolizes God's love for the downtrodden, he emphasized.

"In Juan Diego is represented all the oppressed in time," Father Cadena emphasized. "(The *tilma*) is the way God wanted to reach his people."

Furthermore, the fact that Our Lady of Guadalupe's image was Indian and served to unite hundreds of different tribes in the former Aztec empire proclaims God as a lover of racial harmony, Father Enrique said.

"With the dark face starts the work of integration of people," he said.

Raul Collazo, a parishioner of Mount Carmel Church and a Puerto Rican, agreed that Our Lady of Guadalupe's message goes beyond symbolizing the life of the Mexican people. Her message unites all the Americas, he noted, adding that Puerto Ricans pay tribute to the Blessed Mother as Our Lady of Providence.

"Every country, every city gives her a name," Collazo said. "But she is the same mother of God."

EDITORS' NOTE: *Guardian Angels Church*, 2061 E. Henrietta Road, Rochester, has held a novena to Our Lady of Guadalupe for more than a decade.

The 18th annual banquet in honor of Our Lady is scheduled for 1-5 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 13, at Eagles Club No. 52, 1200 Buffalo Road, Gates. Donation is \$12.50. Reservation deadline is Dec. 11. Call 716/426-0583 or 334-2794.

Correction

The names of two people who were part of the picture package for last week's front-page story, "NIMBY syndrome' hounds agencies," were misspelled. The correct spellings are Daneile Schreib and Kathleen Brenneman. We regret the errors.


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