



The Story of Our Lady of Guadalupe

By Hermes & Cecilia Cervantes

On December 12, the Catholic Church celebrates the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, marking the day when, in 1531, the Virgin Mary, The Blessed Mother, appeared in Mexico to a 57-year-old peasant named Juan Diego.

On Saturday, December 9, 1531, while on his way to Mass, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, an Indian and recent convert to Christianity, heard beautiful music coming from the top of Tepeyac Hill (a suburb of Mexico City). Suddenly, the music stopped, and a woman's voice called out to him in Nahuatl (the Aztec language): "Juantzin, Juan Diegotzin." Ascending the hill, Juan Diego found himself before a beautiful native woman adorned in clothing that "shone like the sun". The woman introduced herself as "the immaculate Mother of God" and she explained the reason for her appearance. She came to request that a church be built there, and she wanted Juan Diego to take her request to the head of the Church in Mexico, Bishop Juan de Zumárraga. The task would not be easy. Like many New World missionaries, Bishop Zumárraga was suspicious of supposed visionaries, fearing it was indigenous idolatry. Skeptical of Juan Diego and the Virgin's message, the Bishop sent him away, but promised to listen again another day.

Dejected, Juan Diego returned to the Virgin and begged her to send someone more esteemed than him, a native Aztec Indian. The Virgin listened tenderly but responded firmly, insisting that Juan Diego be her messenger. The following day (December 10, 1531), Juan Diego returned to the Bishop and recounted the many details of the apparition. This time, the Bishop requested that Juan Diego return with evidence of the miraculous appearance. To be sure Juan Diego was being honest, the Bishop sent two men to follow Juan Diego. But after trailing him for some time, the men lost sight of him, and told the Bishop that Juan Diego was a fraud deserving punishment. Meanwhile, Juan Diego arrived at Tepeyac Hill and told the Virgin Mary of the Bishop's request; she in turn asked Juan Diego to come back the following day, when she would give him the requested sign for the Bishop.

Returning home, Juan Diego received sad news - his uncle Juan Bernardino was gravely ill. Instead of going to Tepeyac Hill, the next day (December 11th) Juan Diego found a doctor, but the doctor said nothing could be done to help his dying uncle. So, on Monday, December 12, 1531, Juan Diego put on his tilma (a cactus fiber cloak) for warmth and went to find a priest. Hoping to avoid any delays, he took a different path to avoid the Virgin Mary. But, as he neared Tepeyac, she descended from the hill, asking what was wrong. She then reassured the sorrowful Juan Diego by declaring her motherhood and promising that his uncle was already healed. Hearing this, Juan Diego asked for the sign for the Bishop, and went to the hilltop as she instructed him. There, in this barren, cold wintery spot, he found a garden of sweet-smelling Castilian roses, not native to Mexico, blooming there; he picked the flowers and brought them back down to the Virgin Mary, who arranged them in his tilma. Juan Diego then set out for the Bishop's house.

When Juan Diego arrived, the servants refused him entry, but eventually let him in when they could not take the flowers from his tilma. Before the Bishop, Juan Diego opened his tilma and the flowers fell out, but an even greater miracle was revealed: on the tilma's surface was the Virgin's image. The Bishop and those in the room fell to their knees, admiring and praying, and the Bishop asked to be shown the place for the Virgin's church. With his mission fulfilled, Juan Diego returned home to find his uncle completely healed, just as the Virgin Mary had promised. Even more, the Virgin had appeared to Juan Bernardino, too, and had told him her name: "the Perfect Virgin Holy Mary of Guadalupe." Two weeks later, the day after Christmas 1531, her chapel was completed, and the tilma with the Virgin Mary's image, was placed above the altar.

What happened next is history. The image on the tilma became the beginning of a conversion movement the likes of which has not been seen before or since.

The fact that the Virgin Mother not only spoke to Juan Diego in his native Nahuatl language but, appeared wearing the dress of an Aztec princess sparked 9,000,000 conversions of native Aztec Indians to the Catholic faith in just under seven years.

Many larger versions of the original chapel have been built over the last 490 years. The current basilica shrine in Mexico City, where the original *tilma* with our Lady of Guadalupe's image is displayed, remains the most visited Catholic pilgrimage site in the world. In 2002, Pope John Paul II canonized the humble Indian and he is now St. Juan Diego.