



Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of the Civilization of Love

By Carl Anderson, Eduardo Chavez

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Nearly a decade after Spain's conquest of Mexico, the future of Christianity on the American continent was very much in doubt. Confronted with a hostile colonial government and Native Americans wary of conversion, the newly-appointed bishop-elect of Mexico wrote to tell the King of Spain that, unless there was a miracle, the continent would be lost. Between December 9 and December 12, 1531, that miracle happened, and it forever changed the future of the continent.

It was then that the Virgin Mary famously appeared to a Native American Christian convert on a hilltop outside of what is now Mexico City. The image she left imprinted on his cloak or tilma has puzzled scientists for centuries, and yet Our Lady of Guadalupe's place in history is profound. A continent that just months before the apparitions seemed completely lost to Christianity suddenly and inexplicably embraced it by the millions. Our Lady of Guadalupe's message of love replaced the institutionalized violence of the Aztec culture, and built a bridge between two worlds — the old and the new — that were just ten years earlier engaged in brutal warfare.

Today, Our Lady of Guadalupe continues to inspire the devotion of millions. From Canada to Argentina — and even beyond the Americas — one finds great devotion to her, and great appreciation for her message of love, unity and hope. Today reproductions of the Virgin's miraculous image can be seen throughout North and South America, in churches and homes, on billboards and even clothing apparel. Her shrine in Mexico City, where the miraculous image is housed to this day, is one of the most visited in the world.

In *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of the Civilization of Love*, Anderson & Chavez trace the history of Our Lady of Guadalupe from the sixteenth century to the present discuss of how her message was and continues to be an important catalyst for religious and cultural transformation. Looking at Our Lady of Guadalupe as a model of the Church and Juan Diego as a model for all Christians who seek to answer Christ's call of conversion and witness, the authors explore the changing face of the Catholic Church in North, Central, and South America,

and they show how Our Lady of Guadalupe's message was not only historically significant, but how it speaks to contemporary issues confronting the American continents and people today.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

CARL ANDERSON, New York Times bestselling author, is the chief executive officer and chairman of the board of the Knights of Columbus. He held various positions of the Executive Office of the President from 1983 to 1987, was a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and has taught at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family.

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Introduction

Mother of the Civilization of Love

TWO NEW EVANGELISTS

The genesis of this book occurred on July 31, 2002, the day Pope John Paul II canonized Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. We were both present that day in the basilica, but we had not yet met. One of us was participating in the liturgical event that he had worked to achieve for more than a decade as postulator of the Cause for Canonization of Juan Diego. The other had traveled to the basilica eighteen months earlier for his installation Mass as the head of the world's largest organization of Catholic laymen, the Knights of Columbus. Both of us were deeply touched by our experience that day in Mexico City, and both of us realized we had witnessed one of the most profound events in the Catholic Church during John Paul II's pontificate and indeed during our own lifetimes, an event that would give deep and lasting hope to the Catholic Church in North America.

This may strike many as an extraordinary claim; after all, John Paul II is now regarded universally as one of the greatest popes in the two thousand year history of the Catholic Church. As pope, he canonized and beatified hundreds of people, wrote numerous encyclicals on theological, moral, and social topics, and commissioned the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the first definitive work of its kind in more than four hundred years. He brought interreligious dialogue to new and unexpected levels while guiding the Church into the new millennium with the focus of hope in Christ.

Beyond the Church, he changed the political map of Europe and the very course of history by helping to liberate nations trapped behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War and aiding in their cause for self-determination within the Soviet Union. Beyond Europe's borders, his concerns for the poor, the disadvantaged, and the war-torn brought a greater commitment to human rights and democracy, especially to Latin America and Africa. But in Mexico that day, as he knelt and prayed awhile before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe after the ceremony, it was clear that he did not want to leave; when he rose to leave, he entrusted all people to the intercession of the newest saint in the Church. He had not only canonized a man of

the past but also given our continent a saint for the future.

Yet, early in John Paul's pontificate, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico was an important, perhaps even indispensable, presence. In an interesting way, John Paul II's first invitation to the basilica was not intended for him; the Latin American Bishops Conference had extended the invitation to his predecessor the month before, and it was only his predecessor's death that opened this opportunity to John Paul II.¹ In a telling way, it was John Paul II's determined desire to pray at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe and to personally engage in the meetings regarding the future of the Church in America that caused him to accept the invitation his predecessor had declined. (Twentythree years later, Mexico would see this same determination; shortly before his trip for Juan Diego's canonization, John Paul II met with his medical specialists, who advised against his making the trip. But at the end of the consultation, John Paul II thanked them for their concern and concluded the meeting by saying: "I will see you in Mexico.") Later, John Paul II would reflect on his first visit to Mexico, recalling that "to some degree, this pilgrimage inspired and shaped all of the succeeding years of my pontificate."²

If John Paul's pilgrimage to Mexico shaped the rest of his life as the universal pastor of the Church, his choice to visit Mexico first and his words commending Juan Diego as an evangelist expressed a new importance and new understanding of the Church in the Americas.³ He recognized the Americas as a hemisphere with a unique, rich Catholic history, and thus as a hemisphere with a unique, rich place in the future of the Church, a hemisphere with great ability to respond to and benefit from a renewed living out of the Gospel of love seen in the witness of the saints. It was in this context that a few months later, the cause for Juan Diego's canonization was officially opened and the Church in the Americas was reexamined and given a new focus: the new evangelization.

NEW SAINT, RENEWED DEVOTION

The story of St. Juan Diego is, of course, the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The event of his canonization cannot be understood apart from the events of her appearance. As with any apparition claim, every detail of the Guadalupan accounts must be examined: each word spoken, each miraculous or extraordinary event that deviates from the everyday, the sequence of events, the character of the people involved, their reactions to the event, their lives afterward, and especially any lingering miraculous effect. For this, we begin with Antonio Valeriano's *Nican Mopohua*, an account of the Guadalupan apparitions in 1531, the earliest extant edition of which is currently housed in the New York Public Library.⁴ The historical record suggests that Valeriano may have derived the information in the *Nican Mopohua* directly from Juan Diego himself, writing it down sometime before Juan Diego's death in 1548 and within two decades of the apparition. Besides this significant work, numerous historical records recall in varying degrees of detail the Guadalupan apparitions, the miraculous image, the church on Tepeyac hill, and Juan Diego's own life; some of the most substantial works include the *Nican Motecpana*, the *Información de 1556*, and the *Informaciones Jurídicas de 1666*. Other items composing the complex record of the Guadalupan event include written accounts, artwork, recorded oral testimonies, investigations, wills, and other works.

Because Juan Diego would be the first Mexican indigenous saint of that time and place, the canonization process demanded extensive research, requiring a grasp of both the history of colonization in New Spain and preColonial culture and religion. Contemporary scholars, historians, and anthropologists specializing in the culture and history of Mexico's Indian people were consulted, and nearly four thousand documents related to Our Lady of Guadalupe were reviewed. Ultimately, the knowledge and insights from such research have revealed the profound relevance and symbolic richness of the apparitions and the miraculous image on Juan Diego's *tilma* (a cloaklike garment), showing how the Guadalupan event conveys in the language and culture of the Indians a message of hope and love.

While the facts regarding Colonial Mexico cannot be changed, the perspective advocated by historians and even the public at large has changed. Unlike many scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemporary biographers and historians often highlight the Spanish conquest and occupation of Mexico as a volatile period of spiritual repression, conflict, and violence. By bringing to light the complexity of this period, contemporary research has played an enormous role in helping us to better comprehend—and even test the veracity of—the Guadalupan apparitions. But unfortunately, while the idea of “conversion by the sword” is now familiar, some people may view the Guadalupan apparition and devotions as a mere by-product of colonization: as a strategic devotion fabricated by missionaries seeking to convert or pacify the Indians with a ChristianAztec story, or as a subversive devotion adopted by Indians who were confused or sought to preserve elements of Aztec religion with a façade of Christianity.

Undoubtedly, the Guadalupan devotions were a cause of concern and confusion at some times, but for us this should not be surprising, considering how even today, in the Information Age, we often encounter mixed reports even on less extraordinary events. While in this book we wish to do more than judge and debate about the Catholicity of Guadalupan devotees, nevertheless it is perhaps necessary to address some generalizations about the devotion that often sidetrack readers from the religious significance of the apparition’s expression of the Gospel.

First, to write off the rise of Guadalupan devotion to manipulation and misunderstanding is not only simplistic but also historically incongruous regarding a politically and religiously complex situation. Among the missionaries, there was no unified front encouraging the apparitions, as many missionaries doubted and even tried to suppress the Indians’ new devotion to the Guadalupan Virgin.⁵ Furthermore, while the missionaries desired conversions, their distrust of the Indians’ Catholicity verged on the scrupulous, even by modern standards; these same missionaries, some of whom were sophisticated *letrados* (theologians) in Spain, were known to hold off giving Indians the sacraments and to eliminate symbolic elements of sacraments that were too similar to Aztec rites solely in order to keep the distinctiveness of the Christian faith obvious.⁶ That is, although oversight may have occurred, purposeful theological contamination, deception, and obfuscation were largely out of character. Additionally, there was a whole range of converts among the Indians, including many who completely forsook their indigenous religious practices—but not culture—for a Christian way of life. What is more, their life as Christians went beyond practices or rites of belonging, such as baptism, to include catechesis.

Likewise, the rise of Guadalupan devotion cannot be explained as a devotion taken up to appease Christianizing government authorities; after all, at the time of the apparition, many of the Spanish authorities in Mexico were themselves incurring excommunication, caring less for Christian life and evangelization than for their greedridden pursuit of political gains.⁷ The fact is, while the *people* in Mexico were involved in both political and religious changes, the *Guadalupan devotion* was not used politically until the devotion arrived in Spain, when an admiral in the royal Spanish fleet took up the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the battle of Lepanto and attributed the subsequent victory to her intercession. Moreover, even though in later Mexican history the image and devotion were appropriated to serve various political and economic causes (notably during the 1810 War of Independence), the original meaning and message of Our Lady of Guadalupe transcends the flaws and purposes of those who have turned to her.

For some, Juan Diego may seem yet another individual “divinized” in answer to the universal human desire for heroes to look up to. This, too, reflects another trend of demythologizing the very men once lauded as great heroes. In this light, what is striking is how Juan Diego’s role in the apparition—even as passed down in testimonies—is already rather humble. While he was called to a significant and meaningful task, he was not called to a “great” task by any measure of earthly grandeur. His role in the apparition itself—his first and greatest claim to renown—was not a call to conquer lands but a simple invitation to intercede on behalf of

one person by communicating a request to another. In essence, it was to vouch for and trust in another person. This simple act is the kernel of meaning and truth that is served, and not obscured, by the grandeur of the divine visitations, the healings, and the miraculous tilma. It was by answering this simple invitation that Juan Diego set himself apart; his was a gesture of humility, communication, advocacy, and trust, a gesture that we perform in less miraculous ways and situations every day of our lives. It is one of the most fundamental gestures of our humanity and the foundation of any society that wishes to live beyond selfish utilitarianism.

THE NEWNESS OF GUADALUPE

Consequently, although we believe the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to be a historical fact, we do not think that it should be consigned only to the pages of history books. In fact, in a unique way, the full radicalness of Our Lady of Guadalupe's apparition can only be understood fully now, when Catholicism's most expressed model for society is a Civilization of Love and its greatest explication of human dignity is the Theology of the Body. For at the time, the violence institutionalized in Aztec religion was not the only place where harsh practices could be found: the European justice system employed in Colonial Mexico and many of the "standards" of holiness among Catholics often included severe punishments and harsh penitential practices that still make us uneasy, even if the practices were less violent and more theologically different from the Aztec human sacrifices. What is notable is that this harshness is not corroborated in the words of the Virgin. In fact, while other Marian apparitions (such as those at Fatima and Lourdes) included words of admonishment or even warnings, Our Lady of Guadalupe's only words of spiritual guidance are her gentle but persistent reminders to Juan Diego about love: a love that can be trusted, a love that gives dignity, a love that is personal. If we are to see in her words an answer to a spiritual problem, the spiritual problem it answers is a lack of love and a lack of understanding about love as relationship rather than as practice. The Guadalupan message is, in its originality, a spiritual education, an education in love.

Today, as life is often characterized by a lack of love and by misunderstandings and misgivings about love, her message is one to take to heart. For this reason, like John Paul II, we think that one of the greatest influences of Our Lady of Guadalupe upon the history of the Western Hemisphere may still be before us. In the sixteenth century, Our Lady of Guadalupe became an expression of hope and unity for millions throughout the Americas. We are convinced that Our Lady of Guadalupe's message is *today* capable of being not only an expression but a true catalyst of hope and unity for millions more throughout North America and the world.

In the Christian sense, this hope and unity are spread through evangelization—that is, through helping one another to find in Jesus Christ the "adequate dimension" of our own life.⁸ A clear picture of how Christians in this hemisphere can approach this task spiritually can be seen in the triptych that Benedict XVI presented in Aparecida, Brazil, on his first apostolic journey to the Western Hemisphere, depicting St. Juan Diego "evangelizing with the Image of the Virgin Mary on his mantle and with the Bible in his hand" and inscribed below with the phrase "You shall be my witnesses."⁹ To evangelize in the future is to evangelize from and through these first witnesses of Christianity.

Historically in our continent, Mexico was not the only country to be changed by this Marian evangelization. As later missionaries left Mexico for the neighboring countries in the hemisphere, including to the lands of the future United States, their evangelization was defined by their devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. As John Paul II wrote in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*:

The appearance of Mary to the native Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac in 1531 had a decisive effect on evangelization. Its influence greatly overflows the boundaries of Mexico, spreading to the whole continent . . .

. [which] has recognized in the mestiza face of the Virgin of Tepeyac, “in Blessed Mary of Guadalupe, an impressive example of a perfectly enculturated evangelization.”¹⁰

For this reason, the pope continued, Our Lady of Guadalupe is venerated throughout the Western Hemisphere as “Queen of all America,” and he encouraged that her December 12 feast day be celebrated not only in Mexico but throughout the hemisphere.¹¹

Just as Mary’s enculturated evangelization overflowed Mexico’s borders, so it overflows the confines of the era and the culture of the apparition. For this reason, she is not only the “Patroness of all America” but the “Star of the first and new evangelization” who will “guide the Church in America . . . so that the new evangelization may yield a splendid flowering of Christian life.”¹² Our Lady of Guadalupe is more than an event; she is a person. As part of her continuing witness to Christ, she continues to aid the men and women of the Western Hemisphere and lead them to a greater encounter with Christ.

While two oceans may delineate our hemisphere and define us as a single community, the solidarity of the Christian life proposed by Our Lady of Guadalupe brings us to a greater solidarity, a global solidarity, when she leads us to a greater encounter with “the uniqueness of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist.”¹³ Through the Eucharist, believers of all nations and cultures find themselves on a path of communion. This communion finds its ultimate source and summit in the communion within the Holy Trinity. As John Paul II wrote:

Faced with a divided world which is in search of unity, we must proclaim with joy and firm faith that God is communion, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unity in distinction, and that he calls all people to share in that same Trinitarian communion. We must proclaim that this communion is the magnificent plan of God the Father; that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is the heart of this communion, and that the Holy Spirit works ceaselessly to create communion and to restore it when it is broken.¹⁴

At Aparecida, Benedict XVI raised this conviction with even greater eloquence and at the same time emphasized its transformative power: “Only from the Eucharist will the civilization of love spring forth which will transform Latin America and the Caribbean, making them not only the Continent of Hope, but also the Continent of Love!”¹⁵

To venerate Our Lady of Guadalupe as Patroness of the Americas and Star of the first and new evangelization is to venerate her precisely as a Eucharistic woman, a woman through whom Christ came to humanity, a woman who experienced a unique closeness with the Holy Trinity. By leading millions more to her Son, and especially to her Son’s real presence in the Eucharist, she will guide the people of the Western Hemisphere to a greater unity whose source is itself Trinitarian communion. For her love surpasses herself, and leads us to the source of love, a Source which demands from us and enables us to love our neighbor without reservation, without hesitation, without borders. For this reason, Our Lady of Guadalupe should also be venerated under the title Mother of the Civilization of Love.

According to tradition, after approving the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe over New Spain in 1754, Pope Benedict XIV quoted Psalm 147, saying, “God has not done anything like this for any other nation.” We may never understand the full uniqueness of this apparition. But through the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, we can expect to see the beauty and power of this event in the transformation of our lives and blossoming of our communities and ultimately our continent.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christopher Riley:

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