

Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

By Rudy Vela, SM

As Marianists we have a context for talking about Mary in many different ways and using many different images that situate her within a culture and a moment in time. But how do we as Marianists begin to share who she is for us today, beyond cultural boundaries? One source is Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Patroness of the Americas.



On December 12, 1531, ten years after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, God sent his mother to a Nahua Indian named Juan Diego. This event marks an interruption in history that completely transforms not only one person, but also that of an entire nation. This event sparks the awakening of a new Christianity, local theology and spirituality that still captivates the religious imaginations and hearts of millions throughout the world. It is not just an event of popular religious devotion but also an official feast of the universal Church. The Guadalupe event continues to transform and evangelize five centuries later.

The story of this marvelous event centers on Our Lady of Guadalupe appearing to Juan Diego. At the moment when Juan Diego encountered the Mother of God, there are no words exchanged. The heavenly music, singing of birds, and the cosmic symbols that surrounded her beautiful mestizo image engaged Juan Diego in a divine way that was respectful of his Nahua culture.

Our Lady of Guadalupe's indigenous beauty; the manner in which she was poised—standing before the sun and crescent moon, draped with a mantle of sky and stars, and carried by an angel—and her posture depicting her compassion, respect, and God's love extended communication beyond mere words. The language of Juan Diego's culture was (and still is today) symbolic.

The moment of the first miraculous apparition was one where the Dark Virgin's symbolic vesture speaks more than any words need be spoken. The Good News of salvation is proclaimed and experienced, respecting the importance of culture at this event. The message of God's incarnation transcends any cultural limitations and was completely understood by Juan Diego during this encounter.

Upon a small hill known as Tepeyac, near present-day Mexico City, Our Lady of Guadalupe asked Juan Diego to request that the local bishop construct a church on that apparition site. She tells Juanito that she wants to be present with all her love and compassion for "all the people of this land."

Juanito goes to the first bishop of Mexico, Juan Zumarraga, and is kept waiting, treated with suspicion, and finally told to bring a sign from this heavenly lady. During Juan Diego's long journey home he finds his uncle, Juan Bernardino, dying of a disease introduced by the conquistadors. This hinders his return to the Lady of Tepeyac for the requested sign. He takes a different route to locate the priest that his dying uncle had requested.

La Virgencita appears along the different route and assures him that his uncle was already healed. Juanito is to return to the top of Tepeyac, pick the flowers of all colors there, and bring them to her. He does as he is told, and La Virgencita arranged the rare flowers on Juan Diego's maguay cactus fiber

cloak—*tilma*—and sent him to visit the bishop with these flowers that would be the sign. Flower and Song are the two symbols that come together that express harmony, truth, and allow one to communicate with the divine. For the Nahua people, flowers were essential to understanding any truth that is of God.

When Juanito unwraps his *tilma* before the bishop and assistants, the miraculous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is imprinted on it. His *tilma* is what is enshrined at the world-renowned Basilica in Mexico City, the site that honors The Blessed Mother of God's request.

Implications for Marianists Today

The Guadalupe event is a tradition of living faith; Mary, the Mother of God, embraces the color and symbols of a particular culture so that she can bring comfort to a people.

- What shape does the image of the Mother of God take for you?
- How does this image make you feel the presence of God?

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