

Saint Juan Diego Icon of Mary's Evangelizing Mission Model for the Laity

by Brother John M. Samaha, SM

The Church celebrates the Feast of Saint Juan Diego on December 9. The canonization of Saint Juan Diego by Pope John Paul II in 2002 elicited worldwide enthusiasm for the recognition of another Christlike lay person. This latest saint of Mexico was the Virgin Mother Mary's chosen messenger of evangelization in the nascent Church of the sixteenth century New World. He is an illustrious example of a Christian in action.

The contemporary significance of the canonization and the occurrence at Guadalupe is multifaceted. But the implication for the new evangelization in our day is overwhelming. The honor bestowed on Saint Juan Diego extends the clarion call addressed to all Christians to respond actively to their baptismal vocation and consecration to collaborate with Mary in bringing Christ to all peoples. Echoed again is the slogan of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, Founder of the Marianist Family, "We are all missionaries of Mary."

Juan Diego's canonization has renewed and increased the momentum of the movement to designate him as the patron saint of the laity and lay apostles.

God's plan for salvation needs the cooperation of us all. In the Guadalupe event, God chose to give the miraculous image of Mary, his Mother and ours, to a humble, lonely widower. The engaging, simple story of Our Lady giving her picture to Juan Diego touches hearts and disposes them for the grace of Baptism. This is a special chapter in the evangelization of the world.

Today, we find stirrings of new interest in the unchurched, the alienated, and the disenchanting. Faster travel and easier global communication portend a new fullness of time in spreading the Gospel. Since the beginning, God has depended on his creatures to fulfill God's plan. Today there is a desire for unity among Christians. The work of the Holy Spirit is uniting them in prayer, love, and works of charity.

In the past century Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII began to reemphasize the importance of the laity. Long before Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council to renew all in Christ, the lay apostolate was a point of emphasis and concern.

One of the sixteen documents of Vatican II is the *Decree on the Laity* (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 1965), and the role of the laity is treated in several of the other documents. Some years later Pope Paul VI sounded a prophetic call to evangelization with the apostolic exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975). John Paul II preached a new evangelization

and, following a synod of bishops, issued an apostolic exhortation on *Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People (Christifideles Laici, 1989)*. Pope Benedict XVI has renewed this call to action, and the synod of bishops in 2012 will ponder this new evangelization.

The Handmaid of the Lord, the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, who first brought forth the Savior for us, plays her part in bringing the Good News to all. The nineteenth-century apostle of Mary, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, is among the strongest voices still reminding us of our baptismal obligation to participate in the apostolic mission of Mary to complete the Whole Christ. Like Juan Diego, all the faithful are called to spread the fragrance of the roses of Tepeyac wherever we are, whatever we do.

"Thy kingdom come," the daily petition of the Our Father, has always needed for its fulfillment the work and collaboration of the laity. To all Christians is given the commission to make Christ and his teaching known, loved, and lived. "The Spirit breathes where it wills" (Jn 3:8), and the People of God help spread God's kingdom on earth.

Our times need strong and dedicated Christian lay people more than ever before. All fields of human progress are directed by the laity. Competence in the social, commercial, and political spheres is in the hands of the laity. Only they can bring the spirit of the Gospel into these arenas. In the words of Paul VI, lay people are "the bridge to the modern world."

Recognizing the ancient truth and the new need, Vatican II issued an official decree on the apostolate of the laity. For the first time in the history of the Church a conciliar document expounded the concept that the lay person is indispensable to the mission of the Church . . . that to be a real Christian is to be an apostle.

The Vatican II *Decree on the Laity* advances, as the perfect example of the spiritual and apostolic life, the Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles. "While leading on earth a life common to all, one filled with family concerns and labors, she was always intimately united with her son and cooperated in the work of the savior in a manner altogether special. Now that she has been taken up into heaven, with her maternal charity she cares for the brothers and sisters of her son" (n. 4).

Consequently, it is appropriate that the model for the laity and the patron of the lay apostolate be one who will lead others to Mary, who in turn will lead them to Christ. She is the perfect example of life on earth united to Christ and joined to his work.

To choose Juan Diego would stress the motherly concern of Mary and highlight a special chapter in the loving care of the Queen of Apostles for her children. Juan Diego's life story exemplifies the meaning of the lay apostolate. He leads with singular and irresistible charm to our spiritual mother.

His story continues today as something living and enduring. It lives in the long lines of pilgrims, the most numerous of any shrine. It lives in the faith of a whole nation and is celebrated in the entire Western Hemisphere. It captivates the hearts of all. It endures in the continuing portrait not painted by human hands, but as Pius XII explained, "by brushes not of this world."

Vatican II taught that "union with those whom the Holy Spirit has assigned to God's Church is an essential element of the Christian apostolate." Juan Diego received the charism. He was called by Mary. She sent him to the bishop: "Go to the Bishop of Mexico and tell him that I sent you." The Spirit breathed on Juan, but judgment and command were reserved to the bishop, as it still is today.

The Holy Spirit usually breathes in less dramatic ways. But, the experience of Juan Diego shows that the inspirational grace for a great work may first come to a lay person, and the chosen person then cooperates with the competent authorities.

Juan Diego's humble compliance with an unwelcomed and embarrassing mission paved the way for an abundant bestowal of God's blessings. In addition, the event clearly indicates that a layman pushed his point with a hierarch. The bishop needed convincing, and Mary told Juan to go back and try again.

Mary clearly indicated to Juan Diego that he was necessary for the execution of heaven's plan. When he protested his inability and urged the Virgin Mary to send a person better known and respected, her answer was: "Listen, least of my sons. You must try to understand that I have many messengers and servants whom I could charge with the delivery of my message and cause to do my will. But, it is altogether necessary that you, yourself, should undertake this entreaty and that through your own mediation and assistance my purpose should be accomplished."

The importance of the most humble person carrying out the divine plan can hardly be more sharply exemplified. Mary did not go directly to Bishop-elect Juan Zumarraga and inspire him. Nor did she choose the messenger most suited according to the judgment of human standards. Mary chose one particular, unknown, middle-aged widower who would have preferred to be left alone. She told him that he was to be the instrument of Divine Providence for these poor people. This unlikely layman was the key to "unlocking graces destined for a nation," and later for many nations.

Juan Diego was wholehearted and without guile. He was a living example of sincerity. When children and adults hear about him they are fascinated, and they love to hear the story retold. His conversations with Mary have a rare quality of tenderness, immediacy, genuineness, and uniqueness. Translated into any language, they possess a special appeal. In the Aztec Indian idiom, Mary called Juan her *xocoyte*, her favorite son, the least of her sons. He addressed her as

xocoyata, his littlest daughter, his lady, and his child. Hearing this conversation one cannot help loving both Juan and his Lady.

Peoples of the emerging nations are able to identify very easily with Juan Diego. He was humble and poor, not enmeshed in political or cultural history. With improved and increased communication, we can expect the Church will proclaim its primary message more widely and wisely. And lay persons will be the primary field workers. Juan Diego, who has universal appeal, would be an inspiration for them and an example for those with whom they work. His story is a perfect example of how God's plans often require lay apostles, and how far-reaching the results can be. Our Blessed Mother promised, "I will make you worthy of the trouble you have taken."

Juan Diego remained faithful until death. The results of his work remain with us. He was childlike and humble in his relationship with the natural world and the supernatural order. While very ordinary and natural, he felt at home with the Virgin Mother Mary. His simple and human qualities touch us all. Saint Juan Diego is genuinely worthy to be patron of lay apostles, for he was the only person on earth to whom the greatest laywoman of all time gave her own picture.

A movement was launched more than a decade ago under the auspices of the Archdiocese of Mexico City to nominate Juan Diego as patron of lay apostles. His canonization lends new impetus to the momentum already in progress.

The actual result of Our Lady of Guadalupe's message, in which Saint Juan Diego played the key role, brought belief in Jesus Christ and the grace of Baptism to countless native Indians of Aztec heritage. In the seven years following Mary's appearance at Tepeyac (1532-1538), eight million Indians were baptized into Christ.

During this period, Saint Juan Diego lived near the marvelous picture, quietly caring for it as Saint Joseph cared for Mary herself. He is a major part of the story of the magnificent lady, her representative, a living proof that heaven had smiled on the poor and the lowly. As with Saint Joseph, we do not know all the details. But we do know the quality of this layman's charity was magnetic. "By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). He was, according to his Aztec name, Mary's "singing eagle," telling her story over and over to his fellow countrymen.

The sterling example of Saint Juan Diego inspires us to activate the continuing action of baptismal grace to be the "salt of the earth," "the light on the lampstand," the "leaven in the Mass," and to "proclaim the Good News by word and deed."