

Our Lady of Guadalupe A Short History

Tony Cosentino, 2007, Updated 2017.

In 1519, Hernán Cortéz arrived at the Mexican coast with 16 horsemen, 400 infantry soldiers and translators, who belonged to tribes anxious to be out from under brutal Aztec domination. Cortéz had received permission from Spain's King Charles V to wage war on the Aztec empire the name of Christianity and the Spanish crown. The arrival of these fair-haired pale-skinned strangers had the Aztec emperor Moctezuma worried. To him, this was the confirmation of ancient prophecies that that the Aztec people's entire world was about to change. Many feared Cortéz was the legendary Toltec priest Quetzalcoatl, who had vowed to return after being banished generations ago for seeking to end his tribe's practice of human sacrifice. Moctezuma sent messengers with gifts of gold to appease these strangers, and dissuade them from marching on his city. He couldn't have been more mistaken.

Spain had just ended 800 years of war to liberate itself from Islam, and was in need of gold to replenish its treasury. Cortéz arrived in the Americas and gathered supporters from tribes hostile to Aztecs. Landing at Vera Cruz, he made the three month journey overland to Tenochtitlán (present day Mexico City), seat of Moctezuma. Upon their arrival, the Spaniards, some of whom had traveled to Rome and Constantinople, were in awe at the city's monumental architecture, its layout, canals, aqueducts and markets. Moctezuma, considered a divine king by his people, welcomed Cortéz and his company as royal guests, lavishing them with further gifts. The Spaniards placed him under arrest, and the Aztecs were ordered to begin collecting treasure as his ransom. Shortly after, Cortéz departed to deal with military problems back at the coast.

While Cortéz was away, a group of drunken soldiers massacred a gathering of unarmed Aztecs during a religious festival, and began to smash temples and idols, starting a small-scale war. Upon returning, Cortéz begged Moctezuma to restore peace, however Moctezuma was struck on the head by a rock and died three days later.

Cortéz and the Spaniards had no choice but to retreat from Tenochtitlán, leaving death and destruction in their wake. In 1521 they returned with reinforcements. They blockaded the city's food and water supply, and a smallpox epidemic broke out. The Spaniards and their allies invaded and destroyed much of the city.

Cortéz eventually established Mexico City there as central metropolis of Spanish America, bringing one of the largest annexations of land and treasure to the Spanish empire. Evangelization efforts by Spanish Franciscans had a marginal effect on Aztec people. The destruction of their way of life and culture at hands of Spaniards was irreconcilable with the Gospel message of God's love in Christ preached by Spanish missionaries. Mexico's Bishop Zumarraga prayed to Our Lady and asked her for a Castillian rose as a sign that his labours for her Son's Gospel were not in vain.

María Tecatlaxupe/Madre Tonanzín

In 1531, an Aztec Christian convert named Juan Diego (his original Nahuatl name *Cuauhteloa* – *Eagle that Speaks*) was passing by the hill of Tepeyac on foot. Tepeyac was the site of Aztec

pilgrimage to honour the mother earth goddess Tonanzín. A woman's voice beckoned him in his own language. As he approached, he heard birds singing. The hill was covered with Castillian rose bushes with blooms of many colours. Yet, it was wintertime and the ground was semi-frozen – the wrong season for roses to be blooming. The voice calling him belonged to a dark-skinned woman. She told Juan her name was Maria Tecotlaxupe, the mother of Jesus. *Tecotlaxupe* (pronounced teh-kwat-la-shoo-peh) literally means *who steps on the snake* in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec people. She asked Juan to go to the Bishop of Mexico with her request that a church be built there in her honour.

Juan departed and relayed Our Lady's message to the Bishop. The Bishop was skeptical and asked for proof. Juan returned to the Lady with the Bishop's request. Mary instructed him to come back the following day, and she would provide the proof the Bishop requested. Upon returning home, Juan found his uncle gravely ill with the measles. The next day, Juan postponed his meeting with Our Lady and set off to find a priest. On his way, Mary called to him again. She assured him his uncle would recover, and instructed him to gather roses from the hillside and to bring these to the Bishop.

Juan gathered the roses in his *tilma* (shawl) and brought them to the prelate. When the *tilma* was opened, the roses spilled out. The fabric was impressed with the image of a young native woman, eyes looking downward in humility; hands together in prayer, pregnant, borne aloft by an angel, standing on the moon and blocking out the sun. At the centre of her image is the *flor de la divinidad* (flower of divinity) indicating that she carried within her the divine Saviour, the center of the new Aztec cosmos.

Juan Diego informed the Bishop the woman's name was María Tecotlaxupe (the-kwat-la-shoo-peh); the Bishop, a Spaniard, heard *de Guadalupe*, and people eventually come to know her by that name. Needless to say, he had received the sign he had asked for. The church was built in her honour, and today, Juan Diego's *tilma* is still on display – no amount of scientific testing has ever been able to give the origin of the pigments in the image. One thing is for certain, in the image of this humble native woman, the native people of the Americas see themselves. In her image, God has embraced their culture and its symbols and raised them to perfection. Our Lady of Guadalupe is their mother, *our* mother; and the human and divine Son she carries within her is our Brother and Saviour.

Up until this time, Aztec conversions to Christianity had been few. However, the image on Juan Diego's *tilma* in many ways rescued and transformed the Aztec religion and culture that Cortéz and his army had tried to destroy. In 1531, there were only a few hundred thousand new Christians on the Mexican peninsula. In the nine years following the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the number of Aztec and *Meztizo* (mixed race) converts had grown to 15 million.

Let's look at the symbolism incorporated in the image itself:

- The woman's complexion and features reveal her indigenous identity
- The brooch around her neck inscribed with a cross shows her to be Christian
- Her eyes downcast, she is humble, and like her people, would not look on the face of God.
- Her hands folded in prayer

- The black ribbon around her waist reveals she is pregnant.
- The flower of divinity located at centre of her image, over her swollen belly reveals that she carries her divine and human Son, Jesus the Christ, Centre of the new Aztec cosmos.
- She is standing on moon – symbol of the serpent god Quetzalcoatl: revealing how the child she carries is much more powerful than this long-expected apocalyptic figure.
- She is held aloft by an angel – attesting to the divinity of the unborn son she carries within her. Only Moctezuma, the divine leader of the Aztecs, was to be carried by others so as not to touch the ground.
- She is standing before the sun – symbolizing *Huitzilopochtli*, the Aztec sun god, to whom human lives were continually sacrificed to ensure his daily return. Her divine child is much greater than this deity, and within her, blocks him from view.
- Her green mantle – the colour of the Aztec deity *Omemeotl*, adorned with stars in constellations recognizable to Aztec people, further emphasizing the cosmic dimension of her divine child's Personhood.

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe rescued the cultural and religious symbols of the Aztec people and infused them with Christological meaning. With these key elements of Aztec culture transformed and set in the perspective of Christ, evangelization proceeded rapidly. Soon the Aztec people came to understand that human sacrifices to the sun-god Huitzilopochtli were no longer needed, because Jesus, the divine son of María Tecotlaxupe gave his own life as the sacrifice to ensure humanity's survival into eternity, and not just into another day.

The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas has much to teach Catholic educators about our important role in the Church's evangelizing mission.

Scripture Verses for Meditation

Zechariah 2:14-17 (2:10-13 in RSV)

Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be My people; and I will dwell in the midst of you, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And the Lord will inherit Judah as His portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem."

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the

Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

Luke 1:39-47

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Revelation 12:1

A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon at her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."

