

## The Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe



The December 12<sup>th</sup> feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe celebrates Mary's role in Aztec culture's coming to Christ. After the conquest of Mexico in 1521, missionary efforts by Spanish Franciscans had won few converts to Christianity. And while the Aztecs' brutal regime of human sacrifice on pyramids in every major town they controlled had ended, their culture was shattered.

In 1531, Mexico City's Bishop Zumárraga asked Our Lady for a Castillian rose as a sign that the Franciscan missionary efforts were to bear fruit. In December of that year, a new Christian convert named Juan Diego (his Aztec name Cuauhteloa, *Eagle that Speaks*) was walking to visit his sick uncle. He heard a woman's voice calling to him from the hillside where his people had worshipped the goddess Tonantzín. The usually barren, cactus-covered winter ground was flourishing with roses of many colours. The voice belonged to a humble Aztec woman who identified herself as María Tecotlaxupe (TEH-KWAT-LA-SHOO-PEH) – *Mary who steps on the serpent*.

She asked Juan to bring Bishop Zumárraga her request that a shrine in her honour be built on the hill.

After a number of visits, Our Lady instructed Juan Diego to gather roses from the hillside and bring them to the bishop as proof of her request. Juan did as instructed. Chancery officials dismissed his appeals for an audience, but he persisted until they relented. He opened his *tilma* before the bishop, and a cascade of roses fell out to expose the image still revered today. Bishop Zumárraga mistook Our Lady's name *Tecotlaxupe* for *Guadalupe* – a place in Spain with its own shrine to Our Lady. He fell to his knees in tears, his prayers answered.

Within 10 years, 9 million Aztecs became Christians. They recognized themselves in Our Lady's image. She is a humble Aztec woman, eyes looking down, hands folded in prayer. Her red dress indicates she is an Aztec princess; her mantle bears the constellations of the time, indicating a new era, and its turquoise colour is that of Aztec royalty. The black ribbon around her waist symbolizes she is with child. Carrying the Divine Christ within her, she blocks out the rays of the sun god, Huitzilopochtli, to whom

countless humans were sacrificed each day to ensure the sun's return; she stands on the moon, symbol for the Aztec mythical figure, Quetzalcoatl (*Plumed Serpent*); angels bear her aloft – something only done for to the emperor-god Moctezuma, whose feet were to never touch the ground. The brooch on her neck bears a cross, indicating she is a follower of Jesus.

In Our Lady of Guadalupe, Aztec culture was renewed and restored to its rightful order in Christ. Jesus, the Son of María Tecotlaxupe offered Himself once and for all as the acceptable sacrifice for humanity's redemption. Unlike the sun-god Huitzilopochtli, the God and Father of Jesus desires not further human sacrifice, but love. Our Lady of Guadalupe is patroness of the Americas and of the unborn.

Juan Diego's tilma, made from agave fibres should have decayed four hundred years ago. It remains intact to this day. The image of Our Lady defies scientific efforts to identify its composition or origin. The pupils of her eyes bear what seems to be a retinal image of Bishop Zumárraga and Juan Diego. The tilma and its image are housed in the basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Thousands of people come each year as pilgrims seeking her intercession, and many more millions turn to her in prayer from afar, seeking her heavenly help each day.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas, pray for us!