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Our Lady of Guadalupe

Coley Taylor

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Coley Taylor, a former editor of the publishing company Devin-Adair, is presently engaged in teaching graduate students at Mexico City College, Mexico City, Mexico. A convert to the faith, he devotes most of his free time to the work of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. He is associated with the English Information Center of this famous shrine and is one of the foremost American authorities on Our Lady of Guadalupe. With Donald Demarest, he has co-authored a documentary anthology entitled "The Dark Virgin – the Book of Our Lady of Guadalupe."

ABOUT THE ARTICLE

There is perhaps no better way to show the timeliness of the article than to cite the remarks of His Excellency, the Most Rev. John J. Wright, D.D., Bishop of Pittsburgh, to the Mariological Society on the occasion of its twelfth annual convention, held last January in Pittsburgh.

"Pope John XXIII has declared a Marian Year for Mexico to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation by Pope St. Pius X of the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe for all the Latin American countries."

"The Marian Year runs from October 12, 1960, to October 12, 1961. These dates are also significant, for October 12 is the civil holiday honoring the opening up by Columbus of the New World to European colonization and to the preaching by Catholic missionaries of the Christian faith. The great admiral sailed the seas on a flagship bearing the name of Mary; his daily prayer and that of his devout men was Jesus cum Maria sit nobis in via!

"The Mexican Marian Year and the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe are of direct concern to Latin America. But I venture the strong suggestion that we of the United States and Canada have an intimate interest in both. It becomes daily, perhaps one should say hourly, more clear that the sources of evil for all the nations of both American continents are the same, and so must be the sources of inspiration and strength. We of the United States and Canada owe it to ourselves and to our Latin American brethren to lose the advantage of nothing that will make us more surely and more securely united in love for the Catholic faith and in defense of our freedom to profess and practice that faith.

"I think it exact to say that the first major threat to such faith and freedom to come from the modern specifically atheistic revolution was that which struck Mexico so cruelly in the 1920s. By the same token, I think it significant that the first successful resistance to aggressive athe-

(Continued on inside back cover.)

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We can proudly — and humbly — say that America is the land of Our Lady. And by America I do not mean simply the U.S.A. I mean all of America — the Western Hemisphere. Every nook and corner of it has been dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, and was so dedicated long before the Bishops in 1846 dedicated the United States to her in her title of the Immaculate Conception, and asked her to be our celestial Patroness. In a very real sense they were only ratifying something that had already taken place centuries earlier.

But the most important dedication of America to Our Lady took place in Mexico in December, 1531. The event was all-embracing; and the deed was done by no other than the Blessed Virgin herself. In her talks with Juan Diego, she specifically claimed him and “all the people of these lands and all who come to me” as her children, and asked that a church be built there at Tepeyac where she could console and help them and hear their prayers and petitions. At that time there were no national boundaries — it was just the New World. And Mexico is almost exactly the mid-point of the twin continents, and the only capital city then known in the Americas. Our Lady claimed all these lands for herself. Mexican and Spanish writers and ecclesiastical authorities from the beginning have always called her Queen of the Americas, and the Apparitions, the American Marvel or Miracle — the maravilla americana.” Those who refer to Our Lady of Guadalupe simply as “the Mexican Virgin” are in error. She is also the Empress of the Americas.

Our Lady first appeared at dawn on December 9, 1531, on the outskirts of Mexico City, to Juan Diego, a middle-aged Aztec convert of several years. He was on his way — a six-mile walk, no less — to attend the Mass for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which was then celebrated in the Spanish empire and some other countries on the 9th instead of the 8th as at present. When he was approaching the causeway crossing the lake, at the foot of the high hill called Tepeyac, he suddenly heard a great choir, as of thousands of birds singing — unknown and unseen birds. He was enchanted and looked up to the hilltop where the music seemed to come from and saw there a shining cloud of brightness in that dusk before dawn, and started to climb up the barren rocks towards it. Suddenly the heavenly music stopped, and then through the silence he heard a lady’s voice call him by name: “Juan, Juan Diegito.” (John, little John-Jimmy. He couldn’t believe his ears and stopped in his tracks, but the voice called him again.

And as he climbed up, he saw her, standing in the luminous cloud or mist, iridescent with rainbow hues. She identified herself immediately
as the “Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God, through Whose favor we live, the Creator, Lord of Heaven and of the earth,” and asked him to go to the house of the Bishop of Mexico and tell him she wanted a church built there, where “I may show and may make known and give all my love, my mercy, and my help and my protection – for I am in truth your merciful Mother – to you and to all the other people dear to me who call upon me, who search for me, who confide in me.”

Juan Diego did as he was told and went immediately to the Bishop’s house in the center of the city, some four miles away. Naturally, the Bishop was not too readily impressed with such an astonishing story, and told him to come back again in a few days when he would have time to go into it all thoroughly. Juan Diego sadly trudged back to Tepeyac with a humiliating sense of failure. Who was he, a mere small farmer and weaver of mats, to talk to the great Lord Bishop, Fray Juan de Zumarraga?

On the hilltop Our Lady was waiting for him and he told her the bad news: the Bishop didn’t believe him. Juan Diego asked her to send somebody else – somebody important whom the Bishop would be likely to believe. However, Our Lady smiled and said it was fitting for him to be her messenger although she didn’t lack others to send, and asked him to go back again the next day – Sunday – and urge the Bishop to do as she asked. So, after Mass at the Franciscan mission church of Santiago (St. James) in Ilaltelolco, he went again to see Bishop Zumarraga and, this time, by his pleading he seemed to impress the Bishop with his sincerity at least and, finally, Bishop Zumarraga suggested that he ask the Lady for a sign by which he might be absolutely sure she was the Blessed Virgin and no other. Juan Diego asked him what sign he wanted, but he merely shrugged his shoulders.

Juan Diego reported all this to his heavenly Visitor on his return to Tepeyac that afternoon at sunset, and she seemed well pleased and promised him a sign the next day, and urged him not to forget, and to meet her at the usual time, before dawn. However, Juan Diego did forget, and did not keep his appointment the next day. When he got home on Sunday night, he found his old uncle, Juan Bernardino, very ill with a high fever – identified as typhus – and he spent that night and all day Monday and Monday night nursing the uncle who had been like a father to him, and very early on the morning of the 12th, Tuesday, he set out on the sad journey to bring a priest from Tlaltelolco for the last rites. It was obvious to all that the good old man was dying.

When Juan Diego was approaching Tepeyac – and it was nearly dawn – he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten all about his appointment with the Blessed Virgin the day before, and he thought if he continued on his usual route between the hills, he would meet her and she would delay him, so he took another path, along the eastern side of the hill, along the lake shore. But Our Lady met him just the same, and asked him where he was going, why he was taking this path? Juan
Diego, in a state of total confusion and embarrassment explained his predicament and asked her to let him get the priest for his uncle, and he'd be back the next day to take the sign to the Bishop. Our Lady put him at ease and said he was not to worry, that his uncle was not going to die; in fact, he was now already perfectly well. So, believing her utterly, Juan Diego asked her for the sign for the Bishop. She told him to climb up the hill to the place where they had always met before, and pick the flowers he would find blooming there.

He knew that no flowers — or anything else except some briars and starved cactus — ever grew on the barren rocks of Tepeyac, but he climbed up, nonetheless. And on the hilltop to his vast surprise he found a garden of roses such as he had never seen before — roses of Castile, not yet grown in Mexico — and in the frosty time of December! He filled his thin white cape, or serape, called a tilma, with the flowers and took them back to her. She took the roses out of his tilma and, like any other woman before or since, she rearranged them and put them back; then she told him to carry them so that no one would see what he had until he was in the Bishop’s presence. And she cautioned him to tell the Bishop everything that had happened before opening his cape to show him the roses. Juan Diego took his leave and Our Lady thanked him and promised to reward him for all he did for her.

After waiting a long time at the Bishop’s house, he was finally ushered into the room where Bishop Zumarraga and some others were, and then he told the story of that morning and opened his tilma. As the roses fell to the floor, the Bishop and his companions with a startled gasp fell to their knees: on Juan Diego’s tilma was a most beautiful painting, incredibly more beautiful than any they had ever seen — the Portrait of Our Lady, exactly as Juan Diego had described her on his earlier visits. The Bishop had his sign: Our Lady’s portrait, of heavenly or miraculous origin, and corresponding to the Woman of the Apocalypse — the Woman clothed with the sun, standing on a new moon, and with the stars — not as a crown, to be sure, ornamenting, her blue-green robe, accompanied by an angel at her feet.

Was ever a Bishop so honored? After long veneration, Bishop Zumarraga took the Miraculous Portrait from Juan Diego and hung it over the altar in his oratory until the next day, when it was transferred to his cathedral church for all to see and venerate. The startling news spread throughout the city with an impact as overwhelming as an earthquake. Everyone wanted to see the miraculous gift from Heaven.

The next day, also, the Bishop and many others, led by Juan Diego, who was the Bishop’s honored guest, went out to Tepeyac to see where Our Lady wanted the church to be built. The building began at once; tradition says that Juan Diego’s fellow-villagers from Tolpetlac built it, and the little house for him to live in, along side it, for he was to be its caretaker and guardian.

By Christmas, the little chapel was ready, and on the 26th a tremen-
dous procession of people escorted the Sacred Image to its first shrine. Pilgrimages have continued ever since, even during eras of severe persecution, and now every year some five million pilgrims and tourists visit the shrine, a minor Basilica now, and privileged Lateran church. Over a million are present on December 12th, the great Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe — the title she herself picked for this image.

The apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe have a great significance for all of us. First of all, she appeared on our continent and called herself our own Mother. These apparitions were the first of the great, universally important visitations of the Blessed Virgin — Guadalupe, Lourdes, La Salette, and Fatima. In all these she has appeared at a time of great crisis, with a special message, but since the Guadalupe apparitions are the first in time, and her declarations of universal motherhood are for all time, these are the foundation stone of the other appearances.

She declared to Juan Diego that she was the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God. This doctrinal statement contradicted emphatically the ideas of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation then turning all Europe into two camps. She called Juan Diego her very dear son, and proclaimed herself a loving mother to all who would come to her with their problems and cares, in other words, substantiating the Church’s traditional teaching that Our Lord, from the Cross, in giving her to St. John as his mother and appointing St. John as her son, was creating for her a universal role as Mother of us all. This was being denied by the Protestant Reformers: Mary was for them simply the historic mother of Jesus and had no other role to play.

She offered her intercession — as a mediatrix of grace — to all who should ask for it. This, too, was of course denied by the Reformers, and where “national churches” were being set up, taking over the magnificent churches of the “Old Faith,” as in England, the many little German kingdoms and the Scandinavian countries, the images of the Blessed Virgin, as well as those of the saints, were being thrown out of the churches and homes and were burned or hacked to pieces. But Our Lady in 1531 firmly emphasized her intercessory role in the communion of saints.

All of these statements of hers are important to emphasize again now, when many Catholics seem concerned about “too great an emphasis on the importance of Mary” in our devotional life. These doctrinal points make her apparitions of 1531 of universal significance, and Bishop Zumarraga, all the Spaniards in Mexico, and the popes from that century to the present have so recognized them.

There is another important point: she did not ask Juan Diego to build the church, or simply ask that a church be built in her honor. She sent him to the Bishop, to the head of the Church in that land new to Christianity. She was giving an order to the Church.

To the Mexicans, who then had no written language, but made their historical and literary records in a symbolic picture-writing, her Portrait had much to say. Since she was standing in a nimbus of light, with rays
representing those of the sun, she was greater than the sun: she was standing on the new moon, and therefore was greater than the moon, and her robe, like the sky, was sown with stars. All these heavenly bodies had long been worshipped, with a god for each, in their pagan pantheon. The Lady was greater than these, and said she was the Mother of all. Since an angel was at her feet, she was greater than other heavenly creatures. Yet she was no goddess, for her hands were clasped in prayer. And at her throat was a golden brooch, a circle enclosing a black cross — the Christian symbol on the Spanish banners, on the Christian altars, and set up before their mission churches. Her Portrait and its symbolic teaching, far more than the work of the score of missionary priests and brothers, converted the largely pagan Mexico to the Christian Faith. And its symbolism as picture-writing continues to teach and convert the illiterate who come on pilgrimage with perhaps only a smattering of catechism dimly remembered. She speaks for herself to all who come to look at her image.

The Portrait itself will be 430 years old on December 12, 1961. When one speaks of a miraculous portrait, meaning one created by miracle, many U.S. Catholics of this scientific age tend to think that perhaps Mexican tradition and devotion are a little too flowery; after all, it was so long ago, and fact can be overlaid by pious fiction in a few centuries, and until they know more of the details they are hesitant to accept it as a miracle. Quite all right. But what they should know is that every religious, scientific test devised from early times to the present results in the same explanation: a painting without a trace of brushmarks (under microscopic study) mysteriously still existing and still uniquely beautiful when it should have disintegrated centuries ago.

It is on a coarse, thin linen-like cloth made of maguey cactus thread, which only lasts from twenty to thirty years or so. Paintings a couple of hundred years younger, in the old churches of Mexico, and on first-rate canvas, are in very poor shape, sadly in need of restoration. No artist, about to paint a masterpiece (and it is a masterpiece), would ever choose such an unsuitable "canvas" as that of the Miraculous Portrait, especially one made of two strips of cloth with a seam right down the middle of the paintable area. This cloth was not prepared for paint by sizing or any other preparation to make it a paintable surface. The hardest-headed artists and scientists frankly write their analyses and report that they cannot figure it out.

Art historians and artists who balk when you say "miraculous painting" are suddenly brought to silence when you ask: "Well, who painted it, then?" For in Spain at that time the art of painting was in a very primitive stage. The great Renaissance art movement did not come to Spain until two generations later. And this Painting is farther removed from the Mexican art tradition — Maya-Toltec-Aztec. They were wonderful sculptors and jewellers, and artists in featherwork and weaving, but in painting their work was crude hieroglyphic.
Scholars who “couldn’t swallow” the miraculous explanation have devoted lifetimes trying desperately to dig up a human painter of this great marvel, but without any success. One might remark that if a human artist of such genius had lived in Mexico in 1531, he would have been working overtime to paint other masterpieces for altar retablos, for the palatial homes of the new-rich conquerors, and his work would have been world-famous from then to now. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is a lone, mysterious, isolated splendor of that time, and to no other religious painting anywhere is there imputed supernatural origin.

The fact that it still exists, after 429 years, taking into account the poor material it is on, is prudently considered a continuing miracle. For well over a century it was not protected by glass, and was exposed to all the vagaries of Mexican weather. The first chapel or hermitage was open at one end (facing the west) except for iron-work gates, and what windows it had were without glass. The fogs and winds from near-by Lake Texcoco, a salt lake, were — and still are — laden with alkali and other chemicals that destroy paint, fabrics, wood, and even pit the surface of stone. But the Portrait is undamaged! In that same first century and more, the smoke of thousands upon thousands of votive candles could have ruined it, but it was never blackened by smoke as so many other noted paintings and statues of Our Lady have been. The Portrait still exists, beautiful beyond description. As Pope Pius XII expressed it: “On the tilma of humble Juan Diego — as tradition relates — brushes not of this earth left painted an Image most tender which the corrosive work of the centuries was marvellously to respect.”

There is something else that is unique about this portrait, this image. There is a sense of Holy Presence. So many have felt it, over the centuries. Many people, and not all of them Catholics, by any means, stop in to talk to us at the English Information Center at the Basilica in a state of bewilderment: “What goes on here? I’ve never experienced anything like this!” Priests exclaim that they were so overwhelmed that they could hardly finish celebrating Mass, priests who have celebrated Mass at St. Peter’s, Fatima, Lourdes, Notre Dame de Paris, Loretto. It is unique, wonderful, and rather terrifying. The humblest pilgrim feels it, too, and many Protestants stop in to say how strange and wonderful it is — they’ve had something happen to them they do not understand; and occasionally Jews, taking the conventional tour with hotel guides, stop for a minute and exclaim: “This is so wonderful. Can we come back without a guide, when we don’t have to rush, and just stay a while?”

A few remarks about the Portrait, which I sent in a letter to the Abbot of Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey, in Oregon, may be appropriate here as personal experience.

“On Epiphany night, January 6, 1960, I had the rare and altogether wonderful experience of examining the Portrait at eye level from a scaffold up over the altar with the floor at the bottom of the frame. My
eyes were about at the top of Her head. The others present were Mon­signor Aguilar, (Acting Abbot of the Basilica), Father Rahm, Brother Rivet, S.J., and Daniel Encina of El Paso. It was an experience very hard to write about since it was so overwhelming. So ineffably beautiful. I’m glad the scaffold was good and wide.

“We were there about an hour altogether and could look and look and study it carefully, as I suppose you must have done when you were here. The more we look and stare the more miraculous it appears. In some places there is scarcely any paint (if it is paint) at all. And all of it is like a wash... a thick wash of some sort on a very coarse canvas almost as open as burlap. When you see the seam, which is broken, you wonder how it hangs together. The expression of Our Lady’s Face is altogether indescribable. It is so tender, so loving, so human in Her enigmatic smile, far more challenging than that of the famed Mona Lisa of Leon­ardo. Reproductions do not convey the gentleness and softness of the molding of the eyes and lips. In some the eyes seem to bulge and lips almost to pout, but there is none of that in the original — the contours are all lovely. And the great feature is, of course, in the eyes, which do not look like painted eyes in a portrait, but really living, human eyes, with the right eye contours. And we all thought we saw very distinctly the image of a man in each eye, but of course we were looking for it and may have deceived ourselves. (Eye-specialists examining it a couple of years ago discovered this phenomenon. The man must be Juan Diego.)

“To me the strangest thing is this: ordinarily, when one is close to a painting, the detail is sharper than from a distance. But with the Holy Portrait this isn’t so. You can scarcely see the stars in Her robe. Yet they are dazzling from a distance. The pink of Her gown is very pale, close to, but very rosy at some distance. And from the scaffold’s near­ness Her robe is not the greenish blue (robin’s egg) one sees from a dis­tance, but a much bluer, and darkish blue.

“This reversal of matters intrigues me no end; and baffles all of us. And it is — or must be — part of the phenomenon of “change in size” one encounters, when the painting looms so large mid-way up the Basilica aisle, and shrinks to “normal” when you get close. That, too, is a reversal. And always there is the tremendous sense of Presence. A magnetic graciousness that has never been my experience with any other painting, religious or secular, that I have ever admired and loved, and I have seen and studied and admired so many masterpieces in my twenty-five years in New York — El Grecos, Goyas, Leonar­dos, Michaelangelos, Raefals, Vermeers, Holbeins, Rembrandts, Raeburn, Titians — in the permanent collections in the museums, in private collections, and in the great loan exhibition for the World’s Fair. There is nothing comparable to Our Lady’s Portrait. She left something of Her Presence with it, that is all I can say.

“Another thing we have all noticed — her face seems “poorly lighted.” It isn’t. I think She keeps it shadowed a little — perhaps out of modesty
— no lady likes to be stared at. And this, too, is another reversal (so far as this picture is concerned). Her face is clearer in detail close to, but veiled in shadow even when one stares at it from the foot of the altar. It is altogether a paradox, and a delight beyond words. And it is this gentle Presence, this vivacious graciousness, this enigmatical radiance that no artist, nor any reproduction, can capture. In some mysterious, supernatural way, She is still here at Tepeyac, a part of that painting. This may be bad theology for all I know, but it is what one feels as a definite mystical experience.”

“She is still here at Tepeyac.” That is the common experience, and I think perhaps Pope Pius XII had this in mind when he wrote: “If the Cross, which then as now rode athwart stormy waves ... were confided to the delicate hands of that young Virgin, for her to transmit it triumphantly to all these lands, she raised it where she would and then retired to her rocky castle dominating ancient Tenochtitlan (the old Aztec name for Mexico City) there to reign over all the New World, and to watch over your faith, since — using the happy phrases of one of your seers — ‘He knew this daughter, as Queen he proclaims her, and she faithfully preserves the trust of the faith which saves the world.’”

His Holiness Pope John XXIII has recently granted a Marian Year, beginning October 12, in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the occasion being the 50th anniversary of the act of Pope St. Pius X in rededicating all of Latin America to her. All had originally been given to her as Patroness by Pope Benedict XIV in 1754, upon petition of the King of Spain, when all these countries were Spanish dominions. In 1910, upon the petition of some seventy Archbishops and Bishops, St. Pius renewed the Patronate, with magnificent ceremonies in her honor in St. Peter’s. This patronage was extended to the United States and Canada in 1945 by Pope Pius XII, on the 50th anniversary of the coronation of the Holy Portrait, when he hailed Our Lady as Empress of America and Queen of Mexico, noting that she had been Queen of all these lands from the moment of her apparitions in 1531, and that at the coronation of the Portrait in 1895, personally ordered by Leo XIII, “when on that angelical brow the golden crown shone so brilliantly, from all hearts and from all throats broke forth the shout until then so impatiently restrained: ‘Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe, Empress of America and Queen of Mexico!’”

It is to be hoped that in this Marian Year, hundreds of thousands of her North American sons and daughters will come to visit her at her chosen American shrine, to give her their homage and love and to lay their petitions at her feet. And if we North Americans in Mexico may express a further intention for such pilgrimages, I am sure it would be that in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington there will be a chapel in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who has been lovingly guarding all these lands of the Western Hemisphere at least since 1531. We need her motherly love and help more than ever.
ism in a nation of the Americas was that of the Catholic Mexicans of the land favored by the apparitions and first patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

"The fresh menace of the same atheistic revolution to Catholic faith and human freedom all over America, beginning in Latin America, but by no means confined to there, makes it, I think, timely and urgent that I preface your academic, scholarly sessions by a plea that you watch for opportunities in your teaching, writing, and preaching to stimulate devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe during the Mexican Marian Year and during all the period of grave menace to Catholicism and to civilization."

The present study, reprinted from Divine Love (December, 1960) with the permission of the author and publisher, represents an attempt to respond to the plea of Bishop Wright, episcopal moderator of the Mariological Society of America.

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**HAIL! O VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE**

"More than three centuries have already passed since the day in which the sweet Mother of Tepeyac began to receive the homage of the Catholics of Mexico and of all America, at the throne She herself chose; you hold her in the center of your hearts, and because of this you have repeatedly proclaimed her your Lady and Patroness . . . 'Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe, Empress of America and Queen of Mexico!' . . .

"The Most Holy Virgin was the providential instrument chosen by the designs of the Heavenly Father to give and present His precious Son to the world; to be Mother and Queen of the Apostles, who were to spread His gospel to all parts; to destroy heresies always, and even to intervene miraculously in all ages whenever it might be necessary for the implanting, strengthening, and the defense of the Holy Catholic Faith . . .

"For this Faith, Mexican Catholics, your brothers and your fathers were victims of persecution, and to defend it they went forth without hesitation, even unto death, with the double shout of 'Long Live Christ the King! and Long Live the Virgin of Guadalupe' . . .

"Do not forget this, Catholics of Mexico, and of all America: the true wisdom is that which she gave us, that which in the name of Wisdom Incarnate She teaches us. Hail, Fount most abundant from which spring the streams of divine wisdom, repelling with the most pure and limpid waters of orthodoxy the turbulent waves of error. Hail, O Virgin of Guadalupe! We to whom the admirable ordering of Divine Providence has confided — without taking into consideration our unworthiness — the sacred treasure of Divine Wisdom on earth, for the salvation of all souls, place again on your brow the crown, which puts forever under Your powerful patronage the purity and integrity of the Holy Faith in Mexico and in all the American continent.

"FOR WE ARE CERTAIN THAT WHILE YOU ARE RECOGNIZED AS QUEEN AND AS MOTHER, AMERICA AND MEXICO WILL BE SAVED."

(Excerpts from radio address of Pope Pius XII to Guadalupe Shrine ceremonies, October 12, 1945.)